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THE BIKINI LINE: RACE, GENDER, AND EMBODIMENT IN TEXAS BEAUTY
PAGEANTS

by

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, for the first time in history, Miss America, Miss USA, Miss Teen USA, and Miss Universe were all Black women. However, in Texas pageantry, where 12 former state titleholders have become Miss America or Miss USA are from, racial representation is scant. Since their inception in 1937 and 1952, only three Black women have won title of Miss Texas America and two Black women have been crowned Miss Texas USA. This study analyzes the motives for competing in Texas beauty pageants, experiences of preparing and competing, and the perceptions of race and racial inequalities among racially and ethnically diverse contestants and titleholders in two mainstream pageant circuits in Texas, Miss Texas America and Miss Texas USA. Data consist of semi-structured in-depth interviews with a sample of 37 beauty pageant contestants from the state of Texas, including former Miss Texas titleholders. Interviews focused on participants' experiences preparing and competing in beauty pageants, their motives for competing, their perceptions of race and racial inequalities in pageants, and their views on how race operates within the current system. Findings revealed significant patterns in participants' motives for competing, preparation for competitions, and perceptions of race within pageantry. The main findings of this study suggest that Black participants' motives to compete were often more focused on collective goals (e.g., serving as role models for other Black girls) whereas white and Hispanic participants' motives were more individualistic (e.g., personal growth), managing racial embodiment by training or undoing certain aspects of their identity (e.g., accent) and features such as negotiating their hair textures and styles to meet dominant white aesthetics, and differences observed among contestant preparation based on the pageant circuit they compete in (e.g., the bikini line). This research aims to add to the already scant

literature on how race operations within the current system in Western beauty pageants especially in the era of the Black Lives Matter movement.

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CHAPTER ONE: SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVES OF PAGEANTRY

In 2019, for the first time in history, Miss America, Miss USA, Miss Teen USA, and Miss Universe were all Black women. In the state of Texas, however, racial representation lags among contestants and state titleholders. Since their inception in 1937 and 1952, only three Black women have won title of Miss Texas America and two Black women have been crowned Miss Texas USA. Given the history of racism and racist policies in beauty pageants (e.g., Miss America Organization), these historical crowning moments warrant further investigation. This study analyzes the motives for competing in Texas beauty pageants, experiences of preparing and competing, and the perceptions of race and racial inequalities among racially and ethnically diverse contestants and titleholders in two mainstream pageant circuits in Texas, Miss Texas America and Miss Texas USA.

Existing literature has posited research on the history of pageants, namely, the Miss America Organization and international beauty pageants. For decades, pageantry has captured the attention of audiences worldwide. Along with this attention, critics such as some feminists and Civil Rights groups have called out the Miss America pageant as objectifying women's bodies and upholding dominant white aesthetics. It was in the 1930s that the Miss America Organization instituted rule number seven that enforced contestants to be in "good health and of the white race" (Banet-Weiser 1999; Roberts 2014; Watson and Martin 2004). While rule number seven was eventually abolished in 1950, it was not until 1970 that the first Black woman, Miss Iowa America, would compete for the national title of Miss America (Banet-Weiser 1999). It would be thirteen years after the first Black woman competed in the national pageant that

Vanessa Williams would be the first Black woman crowned Miss America in 1983 (Banet-Weiser 1999; Watson and Martin 2004). In the Miss USA circuit, Carole Gist was the first Black woman crowned Miss USA in 1990. While racial progress has shifted slowly over the decades at the national level, Texas beauty pageants continue to lag in racial representation.

This study pays special attention to the two mainstream pageant circuits in Texas, Miss Texas America and Miss Texas USA. While known nationwide to be a competitive state at the national level, Texas delegates at the state level are perceived to be highly competitive with a high number of contestants competing each year compared to others states. In 2019, there were 84 total delegates competing for the Miss Texas USA title. In this circuit, Texas holds the record for most victories overall than any other state in the nation with nine Miss USA wins. In the Miss America circuit, Texas has won only three times at the Miss America pageant. In terms of racial representation in both pageant systems in Texas, only three Black women have won title of Miss Texas America and two Black women have been crowned Miss Texas USA. Interestingly, the only two Black women to have won Miss Texas USA, in 1995 and 2007, both went on to win the national title of Miss USA. After winning Miss USA 1995, Chelsi Smith (the first Black woman crowned Miss Texas USA), went on to represent the U.S. at the Miss Universe pageant and won the international title, the only Miss Texas USA to do so.

This study analyzes the motives for competing in Texas beauty pageants, experiences of preparing and competing, and the perceptions of race and racial inequalities among racially and ethnically diverse contestants and titleholders. First, existing literature on beauty pageants will be presented. This section highlights the history of national and international beauty pageants, racism and discrimination in pageantry, and controversies surrounding pageants as sites that are

oppressive and exploitative. The theoretical frameworks that guide this research are intersectionality and the matrix of domination. These frameworks were used to examine the experiences and motives among racially and ethnically diverse women competing in Texas beauty pageants and their perceptions of race and racial inequalities in a space where white women are overrepresented. Next, the methodological approach is examined outlining the data collection process and analysis. Data consist of semi-structured in-depth interviews with a sample of 37 beauty pageant contestants from the state of Texas, including former Miss Texas titleholders from both pageant circuits. Interviews focused on participants' experiences preparing and competing in beauty pageants, their motives for competing, their perceptions of race and racial inequalities in pageants, and their views on how race operates within the current system.

The results of these data are presented in three chapters where I examined the broader social process of participants' narratives. The first chapter explores contestants' desire to compete. In this section, an overview of both mainstream pageant circuits is outlined. The two overarching themes in this section reveal contestants' feeling inspired to compete and being encouraged to compete. The next chapter analyzes racialized motives for competing. In this section, the two emerging themes for participants' motives are hyper-individualism and collective goals. Additional themes that emerged in these data are tokenism and the use of controlling images of Black titleholders. The final chapter of the results is the Bikini Line: Embodiment of Miss America and Miss USA State Contestants. The "bikini line" reveals the differences observed among contestant preparation based on the pageant circuit they compete in paying special attention to excise and dietary regimes and medical intervention (e.g., cosmetic surgery). This chapter explores the management of racial embodiment where contestants, namely

Black women, discuss training or undoing certain aspects of their identity (e.g., accent) and features such as negotiating their hair textures and styles to meet dominant white aesthetics in Texas beauty pageants.

Literature Review

The two mainstream beauty pageants in the U.S. are the Miss America Organization and Miss Universe Organization. The Miss USA and Miss Teen USA pageants operated under the Miss Universe Organization. Both mainstream organizations have captured the attention of Americans for decades. Women are more likely than men to watch beauty pageants on television (Kelly and Garmon 2016). The popularity of American beauty pageants tends to be higher in U.S. Southern states than other regions of the country (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006). Historically, Western beauty pageants have promoted whiteness and embraced Eurocentric standards of beauty and attractiveness (e.g., fair skin, tall, thin, straight hair, etc.) (Anderson 2018; Tice 2005). Both mainstream pageant circuits have long embraced Westernized beauty through the women who compete in them and among titleholders while upholding whiteness through racist policies by barring non-white women from competing (e.g., Miss America Organization).

For decades, beauty pageants have embraced Westernized beauty as the women who compete and win in mainstream pageant circuits adhere to such standards. Beauty comes in different aesthetics worldwide based on values, norms, and ideals (Yan and Bissell 2014). In the U.S., cultural obsessions with thinness, beauty, and attractiveness are embraced especially in spaces like beauty pageants. Adhering to these cultural obsessions privileges those who possess

these same qualities (e.g., white women). Society determines what constitutes as beautiful and aesthetically pleasing often mirroring Westernized beauty standards. Such standards of beauty have created a cultural preference that desires and awards whiteness (Garrin and Marcketti 2018). This cultural preference is translated into beauty pageants as a beauty queen has traditionally been a woman, who adheres to these preferences, and is selected by a group of people serving as pageant judges who deem her as meeting these standards (King-O’Riain 2008). Further, beauty pageants are sites that encompass both symbolism and cultural meanings. During her one-year reign, the titleholder makes symbolic appearances at public functions wearing a crown and sash. The crown and sash symbolize royalty as the beauty queen wears a crown and sash from the moment she is crowned and throughout her reign. King-O’Riain (2008) explains that the beauty queen serves as a symbolic representation of the pageant’s collective identity. This means that she embodies the cultural identity, a shared sense of belonging, embraced by the pageant circuit in which she represents. Despite having a fair complexion, the Miss American and Miss Universe circuits have a history of titleholders that reflect a certain collective identity that is embraced to this day. For example, Miss USA contestants and titleholders embody certain physical traits year after year such as possessing a thin, muscular, and toned physique and sex appeal (Banet-Weiser 1999; Watson and Martin 2004). Conversely, among contestants and titleholders in the Miss America Scholarship pageant, bodies are less managed due to little attention being paid to outward bodily appearance and more on philanthropy, volunteering, education, and talent (a portion of the competition in a Miss America circuit pageant). Women competing in the Miss America circuit may feel less pressure to adhere to an ideal body as the collective identity of Miss America goes beyond aesthetics. A contributing factor to this may be

the elimination of the swimsuit competition in 2018. Conversely, women competing in the USA circuit may feel more pressure to meet the standards of an ideal body given the traditional collective identity of what is deemed most desirable for a USA titleholder. While both mainstream beauty pageants represent a collective cultural identity, the winners embody varying characteristics that are aligned with the identity of that specific pageant. However, collective identities are complex and nuanced in these traditionally white spaces. Given the representation of Black women in 2019 in mainstream pageants, some of whom embracing their natural features (e.g., hair texture and style), collective identities may shift in the years to come in terms of diverse racial and ethnic representation. This may promote rejecting the traditional collective identity in pageantry for non-white contestants as they begin to internalize new meanings of beauty and understandings of themselves (Garrin and Marcketti 2018). Collective identity is displayed in other facets of pageantry including the international level.

International Beauty Pageants

Beauty pageants are worldwide popular cultural public events. They take place in many places around the world and draw local, national, and global audiences. Cohen et al. (1996) explain that beauty pageants span every conceivable group, interest, and topic from infants to centenarians. These contests, from around the globe, showcase values and behaviors that exist at the center of every respective group's sense of itself and exhibit values of morality, gender, and place. The pageant stage is where identities and cultures can be made public and visible. The women who are selected to represent their respective country or group possess qualities and values that embody such ideologies. The beauty queen represents the interests of the country at

large (Edmondson 2003; King-O’Riain 2008). Such interests, however, have revealed the troubled and complicated past of American beauty pageants.

History of Pageantry

Beauty contests have existed for centuries dating back into Greek Mythology and medieval Europe. Pageants first emerged in the U.S. during the nineteenth century. The Miss United States, held in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware in 1880, is the first beauty pageant on record (Cohen et al. 1996). While the goal of this pageant was to attract publicity and tourism, it was seen as less respectable as the first-place prize was a bridal trousseau (Deford 1971). Queen contests became a common feature on East Coast beaches following the Miss United States event. American beauty contests commonly took place at carnivals and at beach resorts.

In September 1921, the first Miss America pageant emerged in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Originally titled, The National Beauty Pageant, the competition consisted of only 8 contestants and was sponsored by national newspapers. Fifteen-year-old, Margaret Gorman, representing Washington, D.C., was the first recipient of the crown. After the crowning, the president of the American Federation of Labor, Samuel Gompers, expressed his support of the new beauty queen, stating Gorman “represented the type of woman that America needs, strong, redblooded, able to shoulder the responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood” (Banner 1983). This pageant reflects the values and ideals of the dominant society (Watson and Martin 2000) and whose titleholders embody this same image. Despite integrating the talent division and eventually awarding college scholarships, physical beauty of the ideal American woman remained central in this pageant system (Banner 1983). Over the years after the first pageant in 1921, contestants

came from all over the nation to compete for the title of Miss America (Cohen et al. 1996). Since its inception, the Miss America pageant has become coveted and controversial showcasing young women from around the country including Puerto Rico (Anderson 2018). According to Deford (1971), scandals surrounded the pageant during its inception as newspapers reported allegations of bribery and corporate influence, and “thugs” trying to intimidate pageant judges with guns. In the section to follow, the racial history of pageantry, namely the Miss America pageant, is told in chronological order.

Racism and Discrimination in Pageantry

Racism is deeply embedded in the history of mainstream beauty pageants as it has historically reinforced Eurocentric ideals of beauty. Banet-Weiser (1999) and Roberts (2014) describe the transformation of beauty pageants in America, namely, the Miss America Organization and its embedded racism. In 1938, Lenora Slaughter served as executive director of the pageant until her retirement in 1967 and is credited with transforming the competition in its earlier years. She integrated rules for the contestants and judging criteria. In Slaughter’s first year in her leadership role, she added a voluntary talent portion of the pageant. Shortly after, in 1938, the talent competition then became mandatory and continues to exist today as one of the competition categories. That same year, Slaughter altered the qualifications rules for entrants. Under Slaughter’s leadership, contestants had to be single, never married or divorced, and were required to sign a pledge agreeing to not engage in acts of “moral turpitude” (Banet-Weiser 1999; Mifflin 2020; Roberts 2014). During that same year, Slaughter instituted rule number seven stating that Miss America delegates must be of “good health and of the white race.”

Women of color were barred from competing in the Miss American pageant system. These principles aimed to value white beauty while devaluing Black women (Watson and Martin 2004). Rule number seven, however, was eventually abolished.

Slaughter's racist and discriminatory tactics continued there after the abolishment of rule number seven. Bess Myerson was crowned Miss America 1945 and was the first Jewish woman to be crowned the national title (Banet-Weiser 1999; Mifflin 2020). Daughter to immigrants and a pianist, Myerson was described as living proof of the American Dream. While she was publicly identified as Jewish, Slaughter pressed Myerson to change her name to Beth Merrick to sound less Jewish, but Myerson refused. During Myerson's reign, she confronted anti-Semitism by speaking out against bigotry and hate (Preston 2016).

The pageant system would not begin to see racial diversity on the Miss America stage immediately despite the abolishment of rule number seven. It was not until decades later in the 1960s that Civil Rights groups would accuse the organization of racism for their lack of Black representation (Banet-Weiser 1999; Welch 2015). These groups publicly pressured the organization to commit to increasing minority participation (Watson and Martin 2000). This would pave the way for social change in the organization introducing its first Black Miss America contestant shortly after. Cheryl Brown was crowned Miss Iowa in 1970 and become the first Black contestant to win a state title. Brown then went on to compete in the 1971 Miss America pageant. In the 1980s, there appeared to be more racial representation of Black women as Black candidates were placing as semifinalists. In September 1983, in a historical decision made by the panel of judges, it was announced that two Black women emerged as the first runner-up and the new Miss America 1984 (Banet-Weiser 1999; Mifflin 2020; Roberts 2014).

Sixty-two years after the very first pageant, Vanessa Williams, representing New York, was the first Black Miss America in history. First runner-up to Williams was African American contestant Suzette Charles from New Jersey. Their victories made global headlines. So much so, *Ebony* Magazine featured cover stories on both women (Watson and Martin 2000). It was ten months after her crowning as Miss America Williams' reign was cut short in July of 1984. Pageant officials asked her to relinquish her crown after *Penthouse* magazine ran an issue featuring photographs of Williams and a white woman engaging in sexual acts (Banet-Weiser 1999; Mifflin 2020). The first runner-up, Suzette Charles, would then take on the role of Miss America. After the publication of the photos, Williams was vilified by both white and Black communities as a "bad example" of and for her race (Banet-Weiser 1999).

The crowning of Vanessa Williams as the first Black Miss America was evidence of a shift in diversity from the pageant's history of embracing whiteness, however, may still embrace Eurocentric standards of beauty. Banet-Weiser (1999) argues that the visibility of Black contestants does not erase the ideology of whiteness that defines the pageant. Indeed, many Black contestants, like Vanessa Williams and Suzette Charles, mirrored Eurocentric standards of beauty such as being tall, thin, and lighter complexion. Despite the pageant's steps forward in creating a more inclusive Miss America, the competition would continue to embrace whiteness by crowning women who embody the same beauty standards. In 2019, thirty-five years after the crowning of the first Black Miss America, for the first time in history, four Black women occupied the titles of Miss America, Miss USA, Miss Teen USA, and Miss Universe.

Controversies

Overtime, beauty pageants have been viewed both favorably and unfavorably among various audiences and groups. While pageants have grown in popularity around the world, unfavorable views of pageantry have always been present. When the Miss America pageant emerged, women's clubs labeled the competition as "indecent" (Watson and Martin 2000). At the 1968 Miss America pageant, feminists protested at the event claiming the pageant is oppressive and an exploitative construction of feminism (Banet-Weiser 1999; Mifflin 2020; Roberts 2014). This feminist group, the Women's Liberation Front, argued that adult beauty pageants "epitomize women's role as a passive, decorative object" (Watson and Martin 2000). Protests escalated in 1996 among the general public over these pageants after the death of JonBenét Ramsey, a famous Glitz Child Beauty Pageant (GCBP) contestant (Kelly and Garmon 2016; Kibbey 2000). Today, GCBP have encountered their fair share of scrutiny and criticism due to children wearing full hair and makeup and other enhancements such as spring tans, false teeth, etc. (Kelly and Garmon 2016; Wolfe 2012).

Many feminist scholars view pageantry as oppressive cultural events that reinscribe patriarchal images of ideal beauty rarely attained by most women (King-O'Riain 2008; Wolf 1991). White feminists argue that pageants are harmful to women and perpetuate a "Barbie-doll" body and physical appearance (Banet-Weiser 1999; Mifflin 2020). Further, they express that beauty pageants objectify women as symbols as a panel of judges make their selections base women's bodies.

The current research study aims to bridge the gaps in knowledge by investigating how race operates in the current system in Miss American and Miss USA pageant circuits after the

historic national and international crownings of Black women in 2019. Given the success of Black women in this space that has largely represented white women for decades, the study will explore shifts in collective identities among racially and ethnically diverse contestants and titleholders. Participants who are non-white may be more willing to reject Westernized beauty norms and aesthetics after witnessing Black women winning who embraced their natural features and hair texture. This study is unique to existing literature as it explores both mainstream circuits and the divide between the two in terms of how race operates and body management practices since the elimination of the swimsuit competition in the America circuit in 2018.

Theoretical Framework

The following theoretical frameworks allow for greater analysis of beauty pageants and the women who compete in them. First, the links between intersectionality and the experiences of racially and ethnically diverse contestants and titleholders are explored. This section, namely, depicts the history of beauty pageants exploiting Black women's bodies in an environment that has traditionally embraced Eurocentric standards of beauty. Next, the matrix of domination explains the complexities of privileges and marginalization among contestants and titleholders in Texas beauty pageants as not separate but rather interlocked. This section reveals how race, gender, and embodiment are displayed in the context of beauty pageants.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is explored through the lens of social inequalities among Black and minority women in pageantry. Thus, racially and ethnically diverse women are uniquely positioned and share unique experiences. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) developed the concept of

intersectionality defining it as analyzing the multiple ways in which race and gender intersect and explore the complex social divisions of individuals who occupy intersectional positions. By adopting Crenshaw's intersectional approach, dynamics and sameness were explored through the lens of race, gender, and embodiment. Banet-Weiser (1999) uses the intersectional framework to depict the complexities of Vanessa Williams' reign as the first Black Miss America. She argues that cultural and political forces shaped Williams' downfall by exploiting dominant narratives of Black female sexuality. Williams participated in a photoshoot, years prior to winning the crown, with a white woman engaging in sex acts. These photos were later published by *Penthouse* magazine, during Williams' reign, causing her to turn over her crown to the first runner-up. After the controversy, Williams was vilified by both white and Black communities as a "bad example" of and for her race (Banet-Weiser 1999). Connecting intersectionality to Williams' unique subject position as the first Black Miss America, her body was not only exploited in these photos, but narratives as being a sexualized Black woman were reproduced as she was in the public eye.

Critics argue that pageantry objectifies women's bodies as they are judged on stage and compared to other contestants' bodies (Banet-Weiser 1999; Mifflin 2020; Watson and Martin 2000). Intersectionality explores not only the unique subject position of Black women but also their shared experiences. As mainstream beauty pageants have long promoted Eurocentric ideals of beauty, Black women's bodies are compared to white women's bodies (Anderson 2018; Tice 2005). As such, white women's bodies are publicly viewed as more desirable and aesthetically pleasing. These characteristics are also highly valued among pageant selection committees.

Black delegates negotiate embodiment between their natural physical features and identity to what is deemed desirable in this space that embraces whiteness.

Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality examines the shared experiences and unique subject position of individuals that occupy an intersectional position. In pageantry, Black women's experiences are uniquely situated in that what constitutes as beauty is in alignment with Eurocentric standards. Patricia Hill Collins looks beyond Black women's experiences and examines how privilege and marginalization are interlocked. The following section on Collins' matrix of domination will critically explore how race, class, and gender are exemplified among contestants in mainstream pageantry.

Matrix of Domination

Beauty pageants have long privileged certain contestants and titleholders while marginalizing others. The matrix of domination, created by Patricia Hill Collins, examines the interlocking patterns of privilege and marginalization. She defines this idea as interlocking patterns of privilege and marginalization along lines of race, class, gender, and other social identities (Collins 1990; 2000). Collins' argues that marginalized groups, such as Black women, are uniquely positioned in society and that they experience unique lived experiences based on their intersecting identities. Social identities, such as gender, class, race, and embodiment situate individuals creating obstacles in their everyday lives while other identities reproduce privileges. Collins explains that these identities cannot be viewed separately but rather as interlocking. Thus, one may be privileged in one area, yet marginalized in another. The following presents

different aspects of identities that are interlocking creating privileges and marginalization among pageant contestants.

In the context of beauty pageants, these competitions have been overwhelmingly restricted to women (Hinojosa and Carle 2016). While beauty contests for men exist, they are quite rare. Women, overall, are privileged in that mainstream beauty pageants require contestants to be naturally born women (as outlined in the requirements). Traditionally, a beauty queen is a woman who is selected by a panel of judges who believe she embodies the qualities needed to serve as a symbolic representation of the pageant's collective identity (King-O'Riain 2008). In recent years, not all who walk the beauty pageant stage are born female.

Recently, transgender contestants have become eligible to compete in certain pageants. Numerous countries and pageantry systems, however, have challenged this new eligibility for transgender women to compete. Just last year at the 2019 Miss Universe pageant, Miss Spain, Angela Ponce, was the first transgender woman to participate in the international competition. While she did not win the crown, she did capture worldwide attention saying it was "an honor and pride" to make history in the pageant's sixty-seventh-year tenure to break barriers for transgender woman to compete (Wang 2018). Rules regarding who can compete in a beauty pageant have certainly shifted in a more progressive direction, however, this is limited to specific beauty pageant systems. From the perspective of Collins' matrix of domination, a beauty pageant contestant who is born female has some degree of privilege over transgender women who have been historically, and in many cases still are today, prohibited from competing in mainstream competitions due to pageant rules.

Social class is also deeply embedded in the context of pageantry in many aspects. Beauty pageants not only reinforce femininity, they also convey middle-class conduct (Tice 2005). Banet-Weiser (1999) explains that contestants participating in local or regional pageants who cannot afford entry fees, wardrobe, and other resources (e.g., pageant coaching) seek sponsorships for support. Sponsors donate monetary means or clothing to assist the contestant in what is required to compete in each pageant category (e.g., interview suit, opening-number outfit, swimsuit, and evening gown). Pageants typically require an entrance fee ranging from hundreds to thousands of dollars. Monetary means are very much a part of the pageant experience for contestants. Middle-class and upper-class women who do not seek sponsorships to help with pageant expenses are privileged in that they have the means necessary to afford the required fees and accessories to compete. Women of lower-class means are marginalized in that they must seek financial assistance through sponsorships to meet the required financial demands to compete. Pageantry is often a steppingstone for women who seek career opportunities in entertainment and politics (Hinojosa and Carle 2016). Thus, this promotes social mobility among beauty contestants and titleholders.

Despite the history of racism in pageantry and a space where whiteness is embraced, the 2019 crowning of four Black women representing mainstream beauty pageant titles shows shifts in what is deemed most desirable. This historical moment demonstrates deviation from Eurocentric standards of beauty to embracing more diversity, inclusion, and representation in pageantry. Thus, this was an ideal moment to study perceptions of race and how race operates within the current system.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

This research study was conducted using qualitative methods. Qualitative research methods explore the richness and complexities of an individual's or group's narratives. Berg and Lune (2012) argue that such method of research seeks answers by examining various social settings and the groups or individuals who inhabit these settings. Qualitative data cannot be meaningfully expressed by numbers but rather through individuals' narratives and detailed accounts. Berg and Lune (2012) also argue that the use of qualitative methods enable researchers to explore emotions, motives, symbols, and meanings associated with the lives of individuals and groups. In-depth interviewing, one method of qualitative data collection, seeks deep information; therefore, it allows us to grasp the multiple views of, perspectives on, and meanings of some activity, event, or place (Gubrium and Holstein 2002). Through semi-structured in-depth interviews and one field observation at a city pageant in South Texas, this study investigated the motivations and experiences of women competing in Texas pageantry and their perceptions of race and racial inequalities in pageantry.

This study investigated the motivations for why women compete in pageantry, the practices they use to prepare for beauty competitions (e.g., dieting, exercise, pageant coaching, wardrobe preparation, cosmetic procedures, etc.), the overall experience competing in pageantry, and perceptions of race and racial inequalities in mainstream pageantry. Data collection began with in-depth interviews with current and former contestants and titleholders' about their motivations and experiences competing in Texas pageantry. According to Gubrium and Holstein (2002), in-depth interviewing seeks "deep" information and knowledge usually deeper than is sought in surveys, informal interviewing, or focus groups. Data collected through in-depth

interviewing usually consists of very personal matters, such as an individual's self, lived experience, values and decisions, cultural knowledge, or perspective and is an appropriate approach for this study.

To address gaps in the literature, I used an inductive, qualitative approach to better understand the world of pageantry through the lens of *Miss* contestants and titleholders who have competed in the state of Texas. Runkel and McGrath (1972) explain how inductive reasoning begins with the data collection process then locates themes and patterns in these data as a basis for generating theoretical possibilities. The interviewees, for this study, led the way in terms of their responses to interview questions; therefore, responses were not predetermined.

This research also employed one field observation that was conducted at a local city beauty pageant in South Texas. During this two-day event, I was memo-writing on the interactions and human behaviors observed as a member of the selection committee for this pageant. Charmaz (2014) argues that memo-writing helps to accelerate your productivity and prompts you to analyze your data. Having served as a member of the selection committee for this local city pageant, I was actively involved as a judge, former pageant contestant in this city pageant, and researcher.

Because this study was guided by inductive reasoning, participants' accounts were examined for common themes, patterns, and developing synthesizing concepts to develop conclusions to the research questions. This approach to research was most appropriate because the chosen method permitted consenting research participants to recount and express the richness and complexity of their experiences competing in pageantry. This study was approved by the University of Central Florida's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in February 2020. Approval by

the IRB ensures that the study follows ethical guidelines guaranteeing the participants' rights and interests are protected (Babbie 2007).

Research Questions

There are three overarching research questions that guided this study. The research questions explore women's motives and experiences competing in Texas pageantry and their perceptions of race and racial inequalities in pageantry. The first two research questions explore contestants' motives for competing and their gendered practices in pageantry. The third research question aims to analyze the relationship between race and contestants' perceptions of diversity in pageantry. Research question one asked: *What are contestants' motives for competing in Texas pageantry?* This question seeks to explore the motivations for why women compete in beauty pageants. Motives may include, but are not limited to, building self-confidence, winning scholarship awards, meeting new people (e.g., creating friendships or sisterhood), or to win a crown for the recognition and opportunities afforded to a titleholder. The second research question asked: *How are gendered practices and beauty rituals negotiated among contestants?* This question aims to investigate the gendered practices and rituals that are introduced when preparing for a beauty competition. Such practices may include how contestants negotiate physical fitness goals, dieting, pageant coaching (e.g., walking and interview), or the use of cosmetic or plastic surgery for the purposes of competing in pageantry. The third research question asked: *How are race and racial inequalities perceived among pageant contestants?* Given the recent shift in representation of Black women titleholders in mainstream pageantry,

this question evaluates contestants' perceptions of racial inequalities and whiteness in pageantry through an intersectional lens.

Participant Recruitment

I began recruiting participants for this study in late February 2020, after obtaining IRB approval. First, I contacted former pageant contestants and titleholders with whom I have built rapport through Texas pageantry in years past as well as those who I interact with on a weekly basis. Many of whom were contacted through social media platforms (e.g., Instagram) or via text message where I briefly shared what my research study was about, how long the interview would last, and asked if they were interested in participating. I employed convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling technique to recruit as many women that were willing to be interviewed. Additionally, I strived to interview as many women from diverse background by using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. While I was anticipating on posting flyers on social media platforms, I ended up not doing so given the early success of my recruitment strategies.

First, I employed a convenience sampling technique. Convenience sampling is a nonrandom technique where the target population meets certain criteria such as easy accessibility to the researcher and a willingness to participate (Dörnyei 2007; Etikan, Musa, Alkassim 2016). Due to my positionality as an insider, I was able to recruit participants with whom I competed at a local city pageant a few years ago. Other participants were acquaintances with whom I knew outside of pageantry who had experience competing in Texas from other pageant circuits. The first several participants I interviewed early in the process were mostly non-Hispanic white women. Because this research intended to explore perceptions of race and racial inequality in

pageantry, it was imperative that I recruit diverse groups of women to hear their perspectives on race and whiteness in pageantry.

To recruit participants from racially diverse backgrounds, the next technique I employed was purposive sampling. This technique is nonrandom and contributes to a better understanding of a theoretical framework (Bernard 2002; Etikan, Musa, Alkassim 2016). This approach enables the researcher to delineate what needs to be known and sets out to find individuals who are willing to provide that insight from their experiences (Bernard 2002; Etikan, Musa, Alkassim 2016). I specifically contracted Black women through the social media platform, Instagram, in hopes that they would be willing to participate in this study. This technique not only enabled me to secure interviews with Black women, I was also able to access Black women representing different pageant circuits they have competed in and won.

The final technique that I used for participant recruitment was snowball sampling. This technique involves interviewing several people with relevant characteristics and then asking them for referrals of other people who possess the same attributes (Berg and Lune 2012). I was able to gain more access to diverse women through these participant referrals. Each participant was asked at the end of their interview if they knew other people, particularly Black women, who met the requirements for participation. On average, most participants provided me with one to three referrals of women from racially diverse backgrounds who met the study inclusion criteria and may be willing to participate. Each participant contacted the referrals before I did so that they were aware that I would be contacting them through social media about this study. This was beneficial given that many of these women were city and state titleholders and prominent figures in their communities and throughout the state. I contacted these women primarily through social

media with the exception of four, who I contacted via email or text message as advised by the women that referred them. Upon the start of every interview, I obtained informed consent from each interviewee and approval to audio record the entire interviews. Audio recording the interviews assures that all information is captured and allowed me to remain fully engaged in the conversations during the interviews.

Sample

Participants consisted of a diverse sample of women (e.g., non-Hispanic white, Black, Latinx, and Asian) between the ages of 20-56 who had competed in one or more pageants in the state of Texas. My initial goal was to conduct 25-30 interviews. However, due to greater access to women willing to participate in this study early in the data collection process, I decided to continue conducting interviews, namely, with participants from diverse backgrounds after surpassing my goal of 25-30 interviews. I decided to continue interviewing because the later interviews, mostly with Black women, revealed compelling accounts regarding experiencing racism and colorblind racism within the current system than my earlier interviews with primarily non-Hispanic white women. Additionally, I found myself probing my participants, regardless of racial and ethnic background, even more so on the topic of race and racial inequalities when themes of racism and colorblind racism emerged. I stopped after interviewing my 37th participant without having to turn away anyone who offered to participate. Of the 37 women that I interviewed, 34 were current or former city and state titleholders who won at least one beauty pageant in the state of Texas from diverse pageant circuits (e.g., Miss America Organization, Miss Universe Organization, etc.).

Table 1: Demographics of Study Sample (n=37)

Table 1: Demographics of Study Sample (n=37)	
Race & Ethnicity	
Non-Hispanic White	15
Black	11
Hispanic	10
Asian	1
Age	
20-24	9
25-29	18
30-39	6
40-49	2
50-59	2
Education	
High School	1
Some College	7
College Degree	20
Graduate Student	3
Graduate Degree	6
Household Income Level Growing Up	
Low Income	6

Table 1: Demographics of Study Sample (n=37)	
Middle Income	25
Higher Income	6

Table 2: Pageant Titles Won by Participants

Table 2: Pageant Titles Won by Participants	
Local Titleholders	25
State Titleholders	8
N/A (Competed but never won)	4

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. I conducted 37 total interviews. Due to COVID-19, only one interview was conducted face-to-face before a shutdown in Texas began during the second week of March 2020. All interviews lasted 45 to 100 minutes. One interviewee requested to complete the pre-interview survey and answer the interview questions using *Word* instead of a phone interview due to scheduling conflicts.

I began all interviews with a pre-interview survey [see Appendix B]. The pre-interview survey is a 14-item survey pertaining to demographics indicating age, height, weight, race, ethnicity, highest level of education, religious affiliation, occupation, and the number of total pageants the contestant has competed in and won. I read each survey question aloud where the participant verbally answered each question as I documented their response. After the

completion of the pre-interview survey, we continued on to the actual interview. The interview instrument consists of nineteen open-ended items exploring women's experiences in pageantry including questions about dieting, eating habits leading up to the competition, workout routines, bodily perceptions, confidence development, the use of religious rituals during a competition (e.g., prayer), and how they perceive race and whiteness in pageantry [see Appendix C].

The interview questions prompted participants to articulate their accounts pertaining to motivations, experiences, preparation involving gendered practices, empowerment, and objectification in pageantry. The interviews also reveal the linkages between race, gender, and racial inequalities in pageantry given the history of racism and Eurocentric beauty standards in mainstream pageant systems. The interview guide was followed precisely during every interview which made it more free-flowing. The first four questions on the interview guide are "warm-up questions." These questions are easily answered and help the interviewee feel comfortable. As the interview progressed, I asked follow-up questions regarding their experiences in pageantry and race. I probed especially when I noticed themes emerging pertaining to racial inequalities in pageantry such as Black representation in pageantry and racism.

I actively listened to interviewees and probed when necessary as they recounted their experiences that were especially useful in developing conclusions to the overarching research questions. Charmaz (2014) suggests that interviewers remain active and alert during the interviews for interesting leads. As a feminist researcher and interviewer, it was imperative that I be sensitive to the ideas, thoughts, perspectives, and accounts my participants shared (Reinharz and Davidman 1992). Many of whom I interviewed recounted having feelings of body dysmorphia, experiencing depression, thoughts of suicide, and experiencing racism. During and

after the interviews, I was memo-writing to note possible themes as they began to emerge.

Charmaz (2014) explains that memo-writing is a crucial step that prompts researchers to analyze their data and codes early in the research process.

Data Analysis

Upon the completion of the interview process, each interview recording was transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. Each transcript was assigned a pseudonym to identify the participant and maintain their anonymity and confidentiality. Because the transcription service had an 80% accuracy rate, I went through the transcripts and listened to the recordings to correct all errors. Despite not manually transcribing the interviews, this process allowed me to become even more acquainted with the interview data. Once the transcripts were corrected, I then listened to the recordings again and read the transcripts where I began coding the data. Coding reveals themes and patterns that emerge in the data. I first began with the initial coding process. Charmaz (2014) describes initial coding as a process entailing close reading of the data that helps us make sense of our data. She states that this type of coding involves naming each word, line, or segment of data. For me, this involved highlighting important words and annotating line-by-line of each transcript in Microsoft Word. After completing the initial coding phase, I began focused coding. Charmaz (2014) defines focused coding as a selective phase that uses significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize large amounts of data. Using Charmaz's approach to focused coding allowed me to pinpoint and develop salient codes as I highlighted quotes to support the results. These findings developed into

synthesizing concepts, theoretical possibilities, and conclusions for the three overarching research questions.

Field Observation

During the interview process, I was approach by one of my interviewees to serve as a member of the selection committee for a South Texas local Teen and Miss beauty pageant in the USA circuit. The new 2021 titleholders from this local pageant would move on to the state pageant, Miss Texas Teen USA and Miss Texas USA scheduled for May 2021. Elated and ecstatic, I happily accepted this opportunity to serve as a judge as this allowed me to document my experience as part of this research study. I took field notes on what I observed from the other judges, pageant staff, Teen and Miss contestants, and the audience members during the live event.

This pageant was made up of two days. Day one was scheduled for a Friday evening where the judges had orientation with the director and pageant staff. Immediately following orientation was the first phase of competition, personal interviews with each contestant competing in the Teen and Miss divisions. Interviews were between the contestant and a panel of 3 judges in a conference room of a hotel. Each personal interview was approximately four minutes long for each contestant. Saturday evening was Day 2 of the pageant competition consisting of the physical fitness for the Teen division and swimsuit for the Miss division, evening gown, on-stage question, and crowning of the new titleholders. The pageant competition was a sold-out show with 300 people in attendance.

This field observation permitted me entry into an area of pageantry I had never witnessed before. As a member of the selection committee, this experience enabled me to interact with the director, pageant staff, and other members of the selection committee. I also witnessed what the director and staff expected of the judges in terms of what a titleholder embodies while also being objective in scoring the contestants. Further, I was able to document the reality of how much physical beauty and body shape was emphasized throughout this experience. So much so, being informed that if a contestant is not in “pageant shape” she should not be selected to represent the city at the state pageant. This opportunity was rewarding and enhanced my research by witnessing first-hand what it is like to judge a beauty pageant, a role I have never experienced before in pageantry. This role was challenging at times serving as a judge and having an “insider” perspective while also acknowledging the themes that emerged in the interviews with participants in terms of objectification, adhering to Eurocentric beauty standards, and racism.

Reflexivity

Throughout the interview process, it was crucial that I practice reflexivity. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007) define the practice of reflexivity as keeping the researcher mindful of their personal positionality and that of their respondents. As a researcher interviewing racially diverse women, I was reflective of my own privileges as a white educated woman and worked to center the positionality of my participants. While my position as a white woman likely limits my understanding of how race operates in pageantry, certainly showing empathy can help.

Having participated in Texas pageantry as a contestant and serving as a pageant judge for one pageant, I have an “insider” perspective not easily accessible to those not connected. This

perspective is referred to as “strong objectivity.” Harding (1992) argues that “strong objectivity” refers to feminist thinkers who hold socially situated knowledge. This knowledge generates stronger standards for objectivity. Thus, traditional objectivity is not rigorous enough and is too weak to accomplish its goals, Harding asserts. My experience as an “insider” and feminist researcher allows me to draw from my experience in pageantry while critically exploring the current system.

I am fully aware of my preconceived notions and biases and am committed to conducting credible research. Indeed, by practicing reflexivity, this enabled me to be mindful of my own biases and practice strong objectivity. Additionally, I ensured that I carefully interpret the accounts and how interviewees are presented in the research findings.

CHAPTER THREE: DESIRE TO COMPETE IN PAGEANTRY

This first chapter of the results explores participants' narratives regarding their desire to compete, particularly in their preferred pageant circuit. In these narratives, I pay special attention to who and what factors contributed to their desire to compete. Participants explained growing up watching national and international pageant competitions on television with their families, especially their mothers, however, their desire to compete goes beyond just watching pageants and is more about what and who inspired them to compete in the Miss America and Miss USA Organizations.

In this study, special attention is paid primarily to the two U.S. mainstream pageant circuits given the amount of representation of study participants from each pageant system. In fact, 92% (N= 34) of participants competed in either the Miss America Organization (e.g., Miss Texas Scholarship Organization), Miss Universe Organization (e.g., Miss Texas USA), or both. This chapter begins with an explanation of the two circuits and discussion of the racial characteristics of contestants in each circuit to provide a context for the study findings.

Following this background information, I first provide an in-depth explanation of the breakdown of study participants who competed in each pageant system. This breakdown will include participants' racial and ethnic demographics, socioeconomic status growing up, and educational attainment. Next, the first of two overarching themes that led study participants to compete in their respective circuits are explored. The first theme explores participants' narratives about feeling *inspired* to compete by others who are involved in pageantry. This theme expounds upon family members (e.g., sister), friends, and titleholders who inspired study participants to compete in their desired pageant circuit. The second theme focuses on the *encouragement* by

others to compete in a pageant. Study participants explained being encouraged to participate in pageantry through various means such as receiving a flyer in the mail, viewing advertisements for a particular pageant on social media, and individuals encouraging them to become involved in pageantry.

Overview of the Miss America and Miss USA Organizations

Each of the two mainstream circuits, Miss America Organization (e.g., Miss Texas Scholarship Organization) and Miss Universe Organization (e.g., Miss Texas USA), are uniquely different from each other especially in terms of competition categories, as shown in Table 3. While both pageant systems have interviews with a panel of judges and evening gown competitions, in the Miss America circuit the competition also includes a talent and social impact pitch (contestant's platform) categories. This Miss Texas Scholarship pageant is connected to the Miss America Organization. After winning a state pageant, titleholders then move on to compete at the national level at the Miss America pageant. Winners and finalists in the Miss America circuit are also awarded scholarships at the local, state, and national levels. The Miss Texas USA pageant is connected to the Miss Universe Organization. State titleholders from the USA circuit also move on to compete for the national title of Miss USA. The winner of the Miss USA pageant then competes for the international title at the Miss Universe pageant where she competes with other titleholders representing other countries. The Miss America Organization does not have an international pageant competition. Within the Miss Universe Organization (e.g., Miss Texas USA), however, there are no talent and platform categories of competition. Scholarships are also not provided in this system. Instead, this pageant circuit includes a

swimsuit competition. Further, the winner receives a modeling contract as well as other lavish prizes. In 2018, the Miss America Organization removed the swimsuit category, an iconic element of the competition. Further, former chairwoman of the organization, Gretchen Carlson (former Miss America 1989), announced that the Miss America candidates would no longer be judged on their physical appearance. Unlike the Miss America Organization, the Miss Universe Organization, who operates the Miss USA and Miss Teen USA pageants, judge its contestants on their physical appearance. It is also worth noting that this organization was owned by Donald Trump from 1996 to 2015. Finally, the age requirements vary between both circuits. In the Miss America Scholarship Organization, Miss contestants must be between the ages of 17-25 to be eligible to compete. In the Miss Universe Organization, contestants competing in the Miss division must be 18-28 years of age. Once contestants age out, they are no longer eligible to compete in either pageant system.

Table 3: Competition Categories by Pageant Circuit

Miss America Organization (Miss Texas Scholarship Pageant)	Miss Universe Organization (Miss Texas USA)
Private Interview with Panel of Judges	Personal Interview
Talent	Swimsuit
Onstage Interview	Evening Gown
Evening Wear	
Social Impact Pitch (Platform)	

Contestants for both pageant circuits must also meet additional eligibility requirements. According to the Miss Texas Scholarship Organization and Miss Texas USA, contestants must be single and never married. They must be U.S. citizens and satisfy residency requirements for the state. This includes physically living, working, or attending school full-time in the state of Texas. According to the Miss Texas Scholarship Organization, contestants must also be in

“reasonably good health” and meet the “character criteria” of the Miss America Organization. According to the Miss Texas USA entry affidavit, contestants must not have been married or had a marriage annulled. Further, contestants must confirm that they have never given birth to a child and are not currently pregnant. Contestants must legally and medically be recognized as female. Finally, contestants in the Miss Texas USA circuit must never been charged of a crime and have conducted her life activities with the highest ethical and moral standards.

Racial representation among state titleholders within each of the state pageant circuits vary. The Miss Texas Scholarship Organization was founded in 1937 and is headquartered in Richardson, Texas (located in Dallas County). Of the women that have competed at the national pageant representing the state of Texas, three were crowned Miss America (1942, 1971, 1975). Since its inception, three Black women have been crowned Miss Texas America. In 2006, sixty-nine years after it was founded, Shilah Philips was the first Black woman to be crowned Miss Texas America. She moved on to compete at the national pageant where she was the first runner-up to Miss America 2007. The second Black woman crowned Miss Texas was Ivana Hall in 2013. Hall was a Top 10 finalist at Miss America 2014. The latest Black woman to win the state title is the reigning Miss Texas 2019, Chandler Foreman. (Her reign was extended to June 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.) She was a finalist in the Top 15 at the 2020 Miss America pageant. While the current study pays special attention to the Miss division, it is worth noting that Miss Texas’ Outstanding Teen pageant originated in 1990. Among its titleholders, two have been crowned Miss American’s Outstanding Teen (2006, 2019). Currently, there has not been a Black contestant to win the title of Miss Texas’ Outstanding Teen.

Similar to the Miss Texas Scholarship Organization, the Miss Texas USA lacks racial representation among their titleholders. The Miss Texas USA pageant was established in 1952 and is headquartered in Houston, Texas. Since its inception, only two Black women have been crowned Miss Texas USA. Chelsi Smith was the first multiracial woman to be crowned Miss Texas USA in 1995. She went on to compete at Miss USA that same year representing Texas and won the national title. Smith then went on to compete at Miss Universe representing U.S.A. and was crowned Miss Universe 1995. Thirteen years later, a second Black woman, Crystal Stewart was crowned Miss Texas USA 2008. Stewart went on to compete at Miss USA and won that same year. She, too, went on to compete at Miss Universe representing U.S.A. and was a Top 10 finalist. The Miss Texas Teen USA pageant began in 1983. It was not until 2019 when Kennedy Edwards was the first and only Black Teen to win Miss Texas Teen USA. There is a dearth of racial representation in both the Miss and Teen divisions in each mainstream pageant circuit in Texas.

In the following section, I will first introduce a breakdown of who competed in which pageant system by explaining this in-depth. This illustration will include participants' racial and ethnic demographics, socioeconomic status growing up, and educational attainment within each pageant system. Next, the first of two overarching themes that emerged in these data will be introduced. Theme one explores participants' narratives about feeling inspired to compete by others who are involved in pageantry. This first theme expounds upon family members (e.g., sister), friends, and titleholders who *inspired* study participants to compete in their desired pageant circuit. Theme two focuses on the *encouragement* by others to compete in a pageant. Study participants explained being encouraged to participate in pageantry through various means

such as receiving a flyer in the mail, viewing advertisements for a particular pageant on social media, and individuals encouraging them to become involved in pageantry.

Overview of the Study Participants

The study data are derived from Texas pageant contestants who competed in varying pageant circuits. Among the 37 study participants interviewed, 24% (N= 9) competed in the Miss Texas America circuit, 59% (N= 22) competed in the Miss Texas USA circuit, 8% (N= 3) competed in both mainstream pageant circuits, and 8% (N= 3) did not compete in any of the mainstream pageants but rather different circuits altogether. Given that the majority of study participants competed in the USA circuit, there was greater racial and ethnic variation among those who competed in the Miss Texas USA system, with 32% (N= 7) identifying as Black, 45% (N= 10) Hispanic, and 23% (N= 5) non-Hispanic white. Among the 24% (N= 9) of participants who have only competed in the Miss America circuit, .11% (N= 1) identifies as Asian American, 33% (N= 3) Black, and 56% (N= 5) non-Hispanic white. Here, we see less racial and ethnic variation among participants from the Miss Texas America circuit. There was no Hispanic representation among this group. There was also no racial and ethnic variation among those participants who competed in both pageant systems as all 3 identify as non-Hispanic white. Finally, among the 3 participants who competed in other pageant circuits outside the mainstream systems, 1 identifies as Black and 2 as non-Hispanic white.

The following subsections illustrate study participants' demographics and other statuses by pageant circuit. Additional demographics include a further analysis of racial and ethnic

representation, socioeconomic status by household income level growing up, and educational attainment. These sections also include titleholder status at the city and state levels.

Miss Texas Scholarship Organization

Among study participants, 32% (N= 12) competed in the Miss Texas America circuit including 3 women who competed in both mainstream pageant circuits (e.g., Miss Texas Scholarship pageant and Miss Texas USA). Within this group of women, there was a dearth of racial and ethnic representation. All participants indicated having a higher level of educational attainment, ranging from some college to graduate degrees. Variation did exist among this group in terms of household income levels growing up with the majority indicating having grown up in a middle-income household. Finally, each participant represented in this category was, at the time of their interview, current or former titleholders within the Miss Texas America circuit, including 2 former Miss Texas America state titleholders.

Beginning with race and ethnicity, study participants who competed in the America circuit varied slightly in terms of racial and ethnic backgrounds, with 67% (N= 8) identifying as non-Hispanic white, 25% (N= 3) Black, and .08% (N= 1) Asian American. There are no Hispanic women represented in this group. When asked about their household income level growing up, two indicated having grown up in a lower-income household, including 1 non-Hispanic white and 1 Asian American participant. Eight participants, or 67% in this category, identified as having grown up in a middle-income household, including 5 non-Hispanic white and 3 Black participants. The remaining two participants identified as having grown up in a high-income level household, both of whom are non-Hispanic white. Participants were also asked to

specify their level of education. Among the women who have competed in the Miss America Scholarship pageant, 25% (N= 3) had completed some college, 58% (N= 7) had college degrees, .08% (N= 1) was a graduate student in medical school, and .08% (N= 1) had a graduate degree. Given that this is a scholarship pageant, each study participant who had competed in this circuit has pursued higher education.

For a contestant to become an official candidate for the Miss Texas Scholarship pageant, she must first win a local city competition. In the upcoming state pageant in June 2021, there are 45 local titleholders vying for the title of Miss Texas America (misstexas.org). Among study participants who competed in the America circuit, all 12 were either current or former local city titleholders at the time of their interview, two of whom were former Miss Texas America titleholders who went on to compete at the Miss America pageant. Both women were non-Hispanic white and grew up in a higher-income household. Of these two women who competed at Miss America representing Texas, one earned a spot in the Top 10 and the other was a Top 16 finalist. One of the former Miss Texas America titleholders was holding a state title in the USA system outside of Texas at the time this research was conducted. She was the only contestant in this study to have competed in both mainstream pageant circuits and had won two different state titles.

Miss Texas USA

Among study participants, 68% (N= 25) competed in the Miss Texas USA circuit, including the 3 participants who competed in both pageant circuits. These women are from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds as further discussed in this subsection. Participants vary in

terms of educational attainment, ranging from some college to graduate degrees. When indicating their socioeconomic status, the majority of participants identified as having grown up in a middle-income level household. Finally, titleholder status varied among this group given that the USA circuit does not require contestants at the state level to hold a local city title like the Miss Texas America circuit.

Of the 68% (N= 25) of women in this study who had competed in the USA circuit, 28% (N= 7) identified as Black, 36% (N= 9) as Hispanic, and 36% (N= 9) as non-Hispanic white. This indicated a higher level of racial and ethnic representation among participants compared to the underrepresentation of minorities in the America system. Further, there was Hispanic representation in this category while no representation at all among the women interviewed from the America circuit. When surveyed about household income level growing up, 12% (N= 3) were lower-income, 68% (N= 17) were middle-income, and 20% (N= 5) were higher-income.

Of the women in this category, 56% (N= 14) are current or former city titleholders or state titleholders in the USA system including two former Miss Texas USA titleholders and two USA state titleholders from outside the state of Texas (both of whom, however, competed at Miss Texas USA but did not win and relocated to other states and won). Of these four state titleholders competing at the Miss USA pageant, one Miss Texas USA was in the Top 15, another Miss Texas USA placed in the Top 10, and one, who represented another state, was first runner-up at the Miss USA pageant. The fourth state titleholder, who won outside of Texas, did not place at all at the national pageant.

Although the Miss Texas USA competition is not a scholarship pageant, all participants who competed in this circuit had pursued higher education. Among this group, 12% (N= 3)

indicated having some college experience, 52% (N= 13) had a college degree, 12% (N= 3) were graduate students (including a doctoral student), and 24% (N= 6) had earned a graduate degree including two participants who had earned law degrees.

The Texas USA Organization is unique from other USA state pageants. From 1992-2009, the Miss Texas USA pageant was televised reaching nine million households each year (misstexasusa.com). This live event has even won 5 Emmy Awards. Today, the pageant is no longer televised and is streamed live online. What also makes the organization different from other state pageants is that Texas has several local city pageants that are optional for contestants to compete in (who are residents) including the cities of Dallas, Austin, Houston, San Antonio, Rio Grande Valley, Kemah, and El Paso. These are preliminary competitions to the state pageant and have the same competition categories (e.g., personal interview, swimsuit, and evening gown). This is not the standard for all states especially those that are geographically smaller, however, those that are larger and have a greater turnout of contestants competing (e.g., Florida and California) have preliminary competitions. Among study participants who competed at Miss Texas USA, 52% (N= 13) had won a preliminary title and represented that city at the state pageant. This is not a requirement, like it is for the Miss Texas Scholarship pageant, for contestants in the Miss Texas USA circuit to win a preliminary competition. The city winners of the local pageants are awarded different prize packages including the entrance fee paid for to compete at Miss Texas USA and other resources to assist the local city titleholders in preparing for the state competition such as pageant coaching and personal fitness training.

Narratives for Competing

The following subsections explore participants' narratives explaining the reasons why they chose to compete in their preferred pageant circuit. Exploring these narratives, I paid special attention to participants' race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, lived experiences, and interactions within pageant communities. Participants articulated varying reasons for competing in their desired pageant circuits. The most common responses for why study participants chose to compete in their desired pageant circuit fell into the following two overarching themes: 1) feeling inspired to compete, and 2) being encouraged to compete.

The first overarching theme for why study participants chose to compete in their desired pageant circuit is feeling *inspired to compete*. Participants often felt inspired to compete after witnessing a family member, such as a sister, or friend compete in a specific pageant circuit. Other examples of feeling inspired to compete were meeting a Texas titleholder or witnessing a woman of color win a national title on television, which led participants to compete in the same pageant system. In addition to knowing someone who competed, meeting a titleholder, or witnessing a crowning moment that piqued their interest, most participants also recounted experiences of watching televised mainstream pageants growing up, thus inspiring some to one day compete.

The second overarching theme that emerged is study participants were *encouraged to compete*. These women were encouraged to compete in their desired pageant circuit upon receiving a flyer in the mail, seeing an advertisement on social media, and encouragement from others to compete. Thus, participants revealed receiving a pageant flyer in the mail that read "This Could Be You!", seeing an advertisement on social media seeking women to compete in a

certain pageant, and being encouraged by family members, especially mothers, friends, or being recruited by pageant directors to compete.

Theme 1: Inspired to Compete

The first overarching theme that emerged in these data in terms of why participants chose to compete in a particular pageant circuit is feeling inspired to compete by watching others who had competed in that same pageant system. Of the women in this study, 30% (N=11) articulated feeling inspired to compete in pageantry, including 5 non-Hispanic white, 3 Black, and 3 Hispanic participants. This indicates that slightly more women of color, compared to their non-Hispanic white counterparts, felt inspired to compete.

Participants conveyed feeling inspired by others who have competed, such as family members, especially sisters, or friends, meeting Miss Texas (America or USA) titleholders, or growing up watching pageants on television and witnessing a monumental crowning. Despite looking up to these women who they saw competing in pageants, whether in-person or on television, participants explained how these women embodied confidence, intellect, and beauty; qualities they aspire to adhere. One participant, a former Miss Texas America, went as far as saying she idolized Miss Texas beauty queens in the America circuit because they are viewed as “state-wide celebrities.” Thus, feeling inspired to compete in a particular pageant circuit by other women and pageant titleholders was a primary factor that led study participants to compete.

For example, Diana explained:

I have two older sisters who competed, one more so than the other. I always looked up to them and I got to see them compete. I really liked it. I liked

supporting them. The middle sister, she was the one that did more of the pageants, and she did mostly the America system. I only competed in the America system one year and it was the year that I was about to age out. I did it because lots of people had encouraged me to, and they kept saying that I should do it. But I had always identified more as a USA system person. So, when I was 24, just about to start medical school, I was about to age out of the American system. I was like, “I’m going to go ahead and get over my fears and go ahead and compete in the America system.” And I surprisingly loved it and I understand why my one sister chose to compete in that system. (Diana, 28, White, Medical Student)

Diana revealed it was her older sisters, both of whom she looked up to, who inspired her to compete in pageantry. While her sisters had experience competing in the America circuit, Diana competed in both pageant systems and learned that she identified more with the USA system. She may have identified more with the USA system given her white privilege in this space where white contestants and titleholders are overrepresented. Further, her experience competing may not translate to the experiences of those who are underrepresented in this gendered and racialized space.

Like Diana, Jada felt inspired after witnessing her friend compete at the Miss Texas America pageant.

I had heard of the Miss America Organization before; I had seen it on TV. I never initially thought it was something that I would do but one of my really good friends competed and won the title of Miss Texarkana. That year I followed her reign and saw her compete at Miss Texas America. She won a rookie award and I

remember thinking, “Oh wow, if she can do it, I could do it, too!” So that really inspired me. That next year, I decided to compete. I didn't have any training, which is why I attribute it, especially my first year, why it took me so long to win [a local competition] because I was essentially learning as I went. I didn't have any coaches or anything. I didn't pay anyone for help up until this year and this year, it was much easier for me to win a [local] title. (Jada, 21, Black, Student)

In her interview, Jada recalled watching pageants on television growing up. However, she did not initially think it was something she would ever get involved in. Interestingly, Jada was not the only Black participant in this study to say this. This may be due to the lack of racial representation of women competing at the national level in years past. It was not until a friend of Jada's competed and won a local title and went on to compete at Miss Texas America where she discovered that she, too, could compete in pageants. This was an emerging theme among women of color, particularly Black women and one Asian woman in this study, who indicated that they did not see themselves in this space due to the underrepresentation of minority women in pageantry. By following her friend's journey as a local titleholder, witnessing her compete at Miss Texas America, and winning a Rookie award at the state pageant, this gave Jada confirmation that she, too, could participate in this space.

Unlike Jada, Scarlett envisioned herself one day becoming Miss Texas America. She stated:

I was idolizing these women who were winning the Miss Texas [America] title and I wanted to be Miss Texas. ... I wanted to be Miss Texas because of the number of appearances that she did. At that time, she was very much considered a

statewide celebrity. ... Some pageants are known for being sexier than others, there's nothing wrong with that. Miss America, as a whole, and certainly when I was competing, was just more conservative. (Scarlett, 41, White, Journalist for NBC News Affiliate, Former Miss Texas America)

Scarlett, a former Miss Texas America, grew up watching pageants on television and envisioned herself one day becoming Miss Texas. She described how she idolized the women she saw win the Miss Texas America title because they were viewed as statewide celebrities who make numerous appearances. Given the overrepresentation of non-Hispanic white women winning the Miss Texas title, Scarlett may not have recognized her own privilege as a white woman in this space and overlooked the underrepresentation of minority women competing and winning in Texas. This relates to Jada's experience, as a Black woman, initially not seeing herself compete in pageants, despite watching them on television, until following her friend's reign and success at the Miss Texas pageant.

This next quote from Amelia, a former Miss San Antonio USA, is consistent with Scarlett's admiration for women in pageantry.

Seeing the women that my Nana was [coaching], I just thought they were the most beautiful, smart, confident women I've ever seen. They were like 16, 17 years old, but I was so young. I was mainly inspired by them. I'd always watch Miss USA, Miss Universe as early as seven years old. Miss USA was just the most amazing thing I ever saw. (Amelia, 27, White, Copywriter)

What inspired Amelia to compete was the interaction she had with the young women her grandmother would coach for pageant competitions and watching pageantry on television. Like

Scarlett, Amelia had great admiration for these women, particularly those competing at Miss USA, who embodied confidence and intelligence. She did not, however, indicate not seeing herself in those spaces but rather admiring the women she saw in person and on television who exuded qualities of what constitutes a beauty queen.

The following two narratives focus on the impact of watching beauty pageants on television growing up that inspired these study participants to one day compete. While they did not personally know anyone who had competed, they did convey having a desire to embody the qualities of a titleholder they saw on television competing at the national and global levels. For example, Veronica explained:

I used to always watch all the pageants on TV with my grandparents. When I was little, I was like, “That's what I want to do. I want to be up there one day. I want to compete!” I didn't know what that entailed, but I just looked up to those women and thought, “Wow, they work in organizations, they're beautiful, they're the full package!” I just found that intriguing, especially being so young. That's when the idea was planted. I waited till after I graduated college to start competing in pageants. I entered my first pageant ever, which was Miss San Antonio [USA]. I had no idea what I was doing. I had modeled [before] so I figured I'll just do that.

So, I went and I got second runner-up. (Veronica, 28, Hispanic, Sports Reporter)

Like many non-Hispanic white participants in this study, Veronica also envisioned herself one day competing in a pageant. From a young age, she said, the idea was “planted” because she looked up to the women she saw competing on television. Given the overrepresentation of

white women competing and winning at the national level in mainstream competitions, it is presumed that these women Veronica referred to were non-Hispanic white contestants.

Like Veronica, Sonia was also inspired to compete after watching pageants on television growing up. She, too, wanted to embody the qualities these women possess who compete in pageantry. After her third runner-up placement in her very first pageant in the USA system, she knew this was something she wanted to continue to pursue.

I grew up watching the Miss America and Miss USA systems on TV. I just loved everything the women embodied. They were just so elegant, smart, educated, beautiful, and confident. And that was something, you know, that I wanted to do and become. That's really what inspired me to do it. ... My first one was Miss Kemah USA and I got 3rd runner-up. ... It was a prelim to Miss Texas USA.

Ultimately, I had a wonderful time and it was something that I wanted to continue doing and keep going. (Sonia, 26, Hispanic, Writer, Actress, and Business Owner)

Sonia's response to having a desire to be like the women she saw competing at the national level is the start of a trend among Hispanic participants in this study. The narratives among this subgroup in Texas pageantry, particularly those in the USA circuit, reveal participants envisioning themselves in this space. This is in contrast to Black study participants in the Miss America and Miss USA systems. The experiences of most Black women who were interviewed was that they did not envision themselves participating in pageantry growing up.

Since the mid-2000s, the participation of Hispanic women in the Miss Texas USA circuit, both competing and winning the state title, has grown. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Hispanic population in Texas in 2019 was 11,525,578 compared to 11,950,774 of non-Hispanic

whites. The population rate among Black residents in Texas was 3,501,610 (census.gov). The population rate among Blacks in Texas is far less than the rate of Hispanics. Given similar population rates among Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites, a common theme that began to emerge in these narratives was that Hispanic women who compete in Texas pageantry seemed to convey similar experiences of envisioning themselves in this space and are driven to compete like their non-Hispanic white counterparts. This may be due to the increased representation of Hispanic women competing in Texas and winning over the last decade and a half.

These next set of participants, 2 Black, 2 Hispanic, and 1 non-Hispanic white, expressed feeling inspired to compete after interacting with a titleholder or witnessing a particular crowning that contributed to their desire to compete. During the interviews, participants named former state and national titleholders who inspired them to compete in the Miss America or Miss USA circuits, including Crystle Stewart, the second Black woman to win Miss Texas USA in 2007 and Nina Davuluri, the first Indian American to win Miss America in 2014. Another participant shared her experience about being “full-figured,” and feeling inspired by a former Miss Texas USA. These women, mostly women of color, also shared how they would strive to emulate the qualities of these titleholders they admire.

For example, Porsha explained:

The first pageant I ever saw was the Miss USA pageant with Crystal Stewart, Miss Texas USA 2008. I got to meet her because she took over the Miss Houston USA system. ... She represented what elegance and beauty was. It was kind of more of a representation type of thing for me because she was a Black female who was very thin. She was very beautiful. She was just somebody that I look up

to. I said, “Wow, if I [compete], I could look like her, be her one day.” (Porsha, 27, Black, Registered Nurse)

Porsha revealed how enamored she was of Crystal Stewart, the second Black woman to be crowned Miss Texas USA. As a Black woman herself, Porsha said Stewart represented “elegance” and “beauty.” Such representation of a Black woman inspired Porsha to compete in the U.S.A. system and believing that she, too, could be Stewart one day as a Black titleholder from Texas. This narrative is consistent with other Black women’s responses in terms of being inspired to compete after witnessing a friend or interacting with a current or former titleholder, leading them to believe they, too, could be successful in pageantry.

Ebony shared a similar statement about feeling inspired to compete after witnessing a monumental moment in pageant history after she saw the first Indian American crowned Miss America.

I’ve always been interested in pageants. I’ve been a performer most of my life. I wanted to do [pageants] as a teenager, just never really got the opportunity to do so. I do remember watching the year Nina Davuluri won Miss America in 2014. That was the first time that I had really sat and watched Miss America on TV. And I remember watching her win and I was like, “I think I want to do that.” My first pageant experience was one that, honestly, I’ll never forget. (Ebony, 25, Black, Health Promotions Specialist)

As a performer and dancer on her university dance team, Ebony wanted to compete in pageants but never had the opportunity to do so as a teenager. It was not until she witnessed Nina Davuluri’s crowning moment as the first Indian American Miss America 2014 that she revisited

the idea to compete. After competing at the Miss Texas Scholarship pageant and placing in the Top 5 on her first attempt, Ebony said this was an experience that will never be forgotten. While Ebony, a Black woman, did not bring up racial barriers in this response, she did speak to Davuluri's historical crowning moment as inspiration to finally decide to compete in the America system.

For Paulina, it was her first encounter meeting Miss Texas USA that inspired her to compete in pageantry. For example, she explained:

I was in elementary school. Miss Texas USA had actually come to our school to give a talk on staying away from drugs and going to college. She was so poised and well-spoken and she was beautiful and dressed well. And I just remember thinking to myself, I would love to do that one day. So that was inspiring for me. ... It was a goal of mine from a very young age because of that experience I had with Miss Texas USA. (Paulina, 34, Hispanic, Department Chair of Religion at Catholic School)

Paulina recalled a childhood memory meeting Miss Texas USA at her elementary school. Like Porsha, Paulina mentioned such qualities Miss Texas USA embodied such as being poised, well-spoken, fashion-forward, and beautiful. She also mentioned after seeing Miss Texas USA give a talk, she was inspired by her and it became a goal to one day compete in a pageant.

The following quote, from Natalia, is consistent with the theme of identifying a certain titleholder that inspired participants to compete. Natalia explained:

It was Brooke Daniels, Miss Texas USA 2009. ... I really just wanted to be in her position. It fascinated and piqued my interest. ... Being full-figured, I was always

the outlier, I wanted to maybe change the game, but I understand the system and the politics behind it. In my experience [in] the USA system, I liked what it represented. I liked the image. I liked the more glamorous type pageant, that's what I've always been interested in and I did not care that they had a certain look or image that they were trying [to promote]. (Natalia, 29, Hispanic, Regional Account Manager)

Despite being a full-figured woman and knowing that the Miss Universe Organization (e.g., Miss Texas USA pageant) places great emphasis on outward appearance, Natalia liked the glamorous side of the USA system. Natalia, a Hispanic woman, said Brooke Daniels, Miss Texas USA 2009 and a non-Hispanic white woman, piqued her interest in competing in hopes of one day being in her position as a state titleholder. While Porsha and Paulina describe wanting to be like the Miss Texas USA titleholders they met, Natalia did not mention wanting to be like the titleholder she was inspired by. Rather, she had a desire to be in her position one day as a titleholder and change the system as a woman who self-identified as full-figured.

For Savanna, it was a former Miss America whom she wanted to emulate. She said: I grew up in Florida, but I had decided I wanted to go to the University of Texas. My dad was kind of joking one day. He's like, "Well, if you became Miss Texas, then they couldn't deny Miss Texas in-state residency." It planted this seed and I started Googling Miss Texas and Miss America, and Miss USA. I found this gal named Katie Stam, she was Miss America 2009. I just remember seeing her as a woman that was so well-rounded. She could speak to everybody from the president of the United States to a little child and be completely comfortable in

every environment. That was the woman I wanted to be. (Savanna, 28, White,

Sales Representative, Former Miss Texas America)

Like Porsha and Paulina, Savanna also expressed having a desire to be like the titleholder she admired before competing in pageantry. She described the characteristics and charm possessed by Miss America 2009 and wanted to emulate those same qualities of being well-rounded and having the ability to communicate with anyone in any environment. While Savanna did indicate that she grew up in a high-income household on the pre-interview survey and spoke upon in-state residency in Texas, socioeconomic factors did not appear to be an issue in her decision to compete for scholarships in the America system.

A common pattern among these responses to feeling inspired to compete was also embodying what constituted the qualities of a beauty queen. Among the 30% (N= 11) of women in this category, two competed in both pageant systems, three in the Miss America circuit, and six in the Miss USA circuit. Despite these differences and commonalities in competition circuits, except for two participants who competed in both, these women articulated their mission to embody what they perceived as elegant, smart, well-spoken, relatable, and beautiful in these beauty queens and contestants.

The theme of feeling inspired to compete was expressed by study participants through their interactions with family members, such as sisters, and friends who had competed, meeting former or current titleholders, and watching pageants on television growing up. Participants articulated a desire to emulate the beauty queens they were inspired by. Others shared how they were enamored by these women's confidence and intelligence. Black study participants spoke upon the influence minority titleholders had on them to compete. Thus, believing they, too, could

compete and win just like the women of color they had interacted with or had seen competing on television.

There are two Hispanic women in this category who did not mention being influenced by any woman of color who had competed or won a pageant title. One mentioned being inspired specifically by a former Miss Texas USA who was non-Hispanic white, while the other did not indicate which Miss Texas USA she was inspired by. However, given that she said she met this former Miss Texas USA when she was in elementary school in the 1990s, a decade in which there was only one woman of color crowned Miss Texas USA, it is fair to assume this titleholder she is referring to is likely non-Hispanic white. Thus, based on these narratives among women of color in this study, Black women are likely to reference being inspired by other Black or minority women in pageantry with whom they can relate while Hispanic participants were less likely to describe being inspired by other Hispanic women or other minorities. This may be due to the high population of Hispanics residing in Texas and the large representation of Latinas competing in the Miss Texas USA circuit compared to Blacks.

Theme 2: Encouraged to Compete

Another overarching theme in this study is participants being encouraged to compete in pageantry. Participants discussed being encouraged to compete upon receiving a flyer in the mail, seeing advertisements on social media, or encouragement from family, friends, or pageant directors. In conjunction to receiving a flyer or seeing an advertisement, some participants discussed how the encouragement of others also led them to participate in pageantry. Among participants in the study, 41% (N= 15) described being encouraged by friends, family members

such as mothers, or by a pageant director and receiving a flyer in the mail or seeing an advertisement on social media. Many of these participants recalled watching pageants on television growing up with their mothers. Those women who were encouraged by their mothers to compete discussed the active role their mothers played leading up to their first pageant experience and their mothers' desire for them to compete to become more refined.

In the following narratives, participants described receiving a flyer in the mail or seeing an advertisement on social media platforms for the Miss Texas Teen USA or Miss Texas USA pageants, and therefore, choosing to participate in the USA circuit.

For example, Clarissa explained:

At the age of 13, I began modeling and acting. I went to New York and Los Angeles to audition, but nothing really panned out on a larger scale. When I was 14, I received a brochure in the mail to compete in the pageant. I always would watch pageants as a child with my mother but didn't ever think about competing.

... When I was 16 years old, Nicole O'Brian Lassiter, [Miss Texas Teen USA 2000 and Miss Texas USA 2003], was training me for Miss Texas Teen USA and she could tell I was struggling with my confidence. She pulled me aside, put her crown from Miss Texas Teen USA on my head and made me envision a moment when I would win. From that point on, I held on to that vision and it carried me through my career. (Clarissa, 30, White, Associate Administrator of the Woman's Hospital of Texas)

Clarissa stated that she received a brochure in the mail about competing in a pageant. Given her history of modeling when she was younger, this brochure she received encouraged her to

compete. To add to this encouragement, Clarissa's pageant "trainer," a former Miss Texas Teen and Miss Texas USA, helped her envision herself winning by placing the Miss Texas Teen USA crown on her head. Here, the crown is symbolic because there is a shared meaning between her and her trainer, a former Miss Texas USA, that it represents winning, success, and is associated with a title (e.g., Miss Texas USA). In this moment, the crown placed on her head helped Clarissa imagine herself winning and it paved the way for her to overcome her struggle with confidence as she prepared for the pageant.

Like Clarissa, Selena also watched pageants on television with her mother. She, too, saw a flyer about competing in a pageant. She stated:

I wanted to step out of my comfort zone a little bit. I remember when I was in elementary school, I always watched Miss Texas growing up and Miss Universe. I would always tell my mom, "Mom, I want to be Miss Texas." I saw the flyer that was going around the community and I thought, "You know, why not?" My mom is always my biggest motivator. She says anything I set my mind to, I can accomplish it or do it. So, I gave it a shot. It was scary for me because it was my first USA system pageant and I cried because I felt out of my comfort zone.

Looking around, I felt like I didn't belong. (Selena, 24, Hispanic, Running for City Council)

Selena's mother told her that anything she sets her mind to, she can accomplish it. In fact, she recalled telling her mother that she wanted to be Miss Texas. A combination of her mother's motivation and the flyer she saw about competing in a pageant are what encouraged her to compete. However, like Clarissa, Selena struggled with confidence. She said that at her first

pageant competition, she became emotional because she felt out of her comfort zone and when she looked around, she did not feel like she belong there. While she did not mention race or ethnicity in her response, body image and embodiment may have been factors in her becoming emotional and feeling like she did not belong in this space that is highly competitive and where outward appearance is crucial.

The next set of quotes from study participants cited the active role their mothers played in encouraging them to compete in pageantry. The mothers of these participants are described as their biggest motivators, watching pageants together growing up, and encouraging them to compete in their first pageant.

For example, Louise explained:

My mom wanted to be in Miss America because she had grown up watching it. She told me when I was young, she said, “Louise, it would be awesome if you could go and compete in a pageant, it would make me so happy if you just tried it once.” I’m grateful that she mentioned it because I’ve learned so much from pageants. It’s been amazing. ... With having a platform and finding ways to visit different places once you were crowned, going to different schools, talking at gatherings within the state of Texas or within your city, just to talk about what was on your heart so that you could help other people and you could go and raise money for charity that you really believed in. That was really amazing to me.

(Louise, 25, White, Unemployed)

Louise discussed how her mother encouraged her to compete in pageantry, as they would watch pageants on television together. Given that her mother wanted to compete in Miss America,

Louise may have also been encouraged to compete more so in the Miss America circuit, however, she did have experience competing in both pageant systems. Based on her mother's encouragement, it seemed as though her mother was trying to seek happiness through Louise's participation and experience in pageantry and as a local city titleholder in the America circuit. While she did not speak upon this, Louise may have felt pressured to compete as her mother stated that this would make her "so happy" if she just tried it once.

Kandi was also encouraged by her mother to compete. She explained:

I received a flyer [for Miss Texas Teen USA] in the mail and my mom just encouraged me to compete in it. She wanted me to just have an avenue where I can actually start getting into my feminine side and she thought it would be a good way to just learn more about myself and to get over stage fright. ... After I started competing, that's when I really got into pageantry, but I never thought about being Miss USA or Miss Universe, never. ... I was [crowned] the first and only Black Miss San Antonio Teen USA. Pageants really did change the trajectory of my life. (Kandi, 32, Black, Senior Onboard Specialist)

This quote from Kandi is compelling and consistent with other Black study participants' narratives about their experiences leading up to competing. She and many others indicated that they never imagined themselves or believed they could one day compete in a pageant or become a titleholder. Kandi explained that her mother encouraged her to compete in her first pageant as this would help her overcome stage fright, become better acquainted with her femininity, and learn more about herself. She discussed the racial barriers she overcame in this space as the first Black contestant to win the title of Miss San Antonio Teen USA. Her mother's encouragement

led her to this historical crowning moment and the experience overall, she said positively changed the trajectory of her life.

In contrast to Kandi's quote above, Claire, a white participant, talked about individual growth rather than breaking through racial or ethnic stereotypes. Claire states:

I always watched pageants on TV. There was something sort of magical about it. You rooted for Texas because that's where you're from. In junior high and high school, I got bullied for being too skinny and too nice. I started to get pretty depressed. My mom got a flyer in the mail and it said, "This could be you! Apply to be in the Miss Texas Teen USA pageant!" She convinced me that it would be a positive outlet to just work on my self-esteem. I decided to try it, had no experience. I knew to get a spray tan, but that's about it. I did my first pageant and I ended up placing in the Top 15 with no experience and no pageant skills, per se. I was hooked because the girls were so nice and I'd never been in an environment that was so uplifting before. And I just knew from that moment on that, that's what I wanted to achieve. (Claire, 25, White, Realtor, Former Miss Texas USA)

Claire, a former Miss Texas USA, explained how her mother convinced her to compete in her first pageant, in the USA circuit, as an outlet for her to improve her personal development, including issues with self-esteem that resulted from being bullied in school. Once she began competing and placed in the Top 15 with no pageant experience, she knew winning was something she wanted to achieve. After a successful first attempt at her first pageant competition, she believed she could win and continued competing thereafter. Claire's experience was quite different from Black participants' experiences due to her white privilege in pageantry. Black

participants expressed concerns over not envisioning themselves in these spaces or ever winning a title given how whiteness was embraced in pageantry. These Black women spoke about breaking through racial and ethnic stereotypes that non-Hispanic white and Hispanic women in this study seem to be unfamiliar with due to their lived experiences in pageantry. Additionally, Claire's response was driven more so by individual goals of wanting to be Miss Texas USA, goals expressed by many other non-Hispanic white contestants. Because they are white in a space that embraces whiteness, racial barriers were not a concern for this group of women.

The next two quotes were consistent with the theme of how participants' mothers played an active role in these women's decisions to compete. However, what stood out most here is the extent to which these mothers went to get their daughters involved in pageantry, namely in the USA circuit, in hopes of becoming better versions of themselves.

For example, María explained:

The very first pageant I ever did was Miss San Antonio USA and my mom signed me up without telling me. ... She wanted me to be more refined and presentable. ... I watched Miss USA, Miss Universe on TV, but never thinking that I would ever do one in my lifetime. I just remember seeing all the other girls and thinking, "I want to make myself that polished. I want to be that refined. I want to be that well-spoken," because I remember watching all of y'all and just thinking how behind I was. ... So, I competed five times for Miss San Antonio [USA] until I won on the fifth time. (María, 29, Hispanic, Engineering Designer)

María expressed it was her mother who signed her up for the pageant in hopes of her becoming more "presentable." During her first experience in this space, she recalled wanting to mirror the

other women she was competing with as she described them as polished, refined, and well-spoken. She admitted how “behind” she was during this first experience. This drive to mimic the other contestants may also have been due to her mother’s desire for María to be more “refined and presentable.”

Like María, Marisol explained the active role her mother played in her deciding to compete. She stated:

My mom said, “Oh my God, I got a letter from the Trump Organization about this pageant and might be something you’d be interested in!” I was like, “Absolutely not.” Walking around on stage in a swimsuit and talking in public just seemed like a nightmare. She kind of coerced me into the idea because I had struggled so much with confidence and self-esteem my whole life, my issues tended to be on more of the extreme side. ... So, off I went to Miss Texas [USA]. That moment in time changed everything for me. I’m forever grateful that my mom sent in a picture [of me] I never would have approved of because it did alter the course of my life in such a positive and beautiful way. I’m really grateful for that. (Marisol, 33, Hispanic, Marketing Director)

Marisol revealed her extreme struggle with confidence and self-esteem her entire life. She had no desire to compete in pageants until her mother “coerced” her into the idea to help her overcome her struggles. This one experience competing at Miss Texas USA, she said, had changed everything for her in a positive way.

These two women, both Hispanic, had similar experiences of how active their mothers were in encouraging them to participate in pageantry. Their mothers believed their participation

would improve the personal development of their daughters, such as gaining confidence and “refinement” (e.g., being more “presentable” and enhancing their public speaking skills). After agreeing to participate, both women expressed the impact these experiences had on their lives as both, through years of competing, became city titleholders and competed for the Miss Texas USA title.

Continuing with the theme of flyers in the mail and advertisements on social media, encouragement from friends and family friends were reoccurring themes. Of the 41% (N= 15) of participants who were encouraged to compete, four indicated being encouraged to compete by friends and close family friends. Both flyers and advertisements in conjunction with encouragement from others were factors in the decision for these participants to compete in pageantry.

Tamron was a National Football League (NFL) cheerleader, at the time, when her squad encouraged her to compete in pageantry. She explained:

My cheerleader friends, they were like, “You should do a pageant.” And I said, “No.” And then when I was done cheering, I kept seeing this sponsored ad on Instagram about the Miss Houston USA pageant. And I was like, “You know what, let me just go for it. What's the worst? I've got nothing to lose.” But then when I won [Miss Houston USA], I was like, “Oh my gosh! What have I gotten myself into?!” (Tamron, 26, Black, Human Resources Director)

Initially, Tamron was not interested in competing despite the encouragement from her squad. However, it was not until she saw an advertisement on social media for the Miss Houston USA pageant that she decided give pageantry a try. When she finally did, she won on her first attempt.

Tamron, a Black woman, did not indicate why she was not initially interested in competing. Given that she was a former NFL cheerleader and won on her first attempt in a USA pageant, this reinforces the importance and value placed upon physical appearance specifically in this pageant system.

Holly was also encouraged by her friends to compete. For example, she said:

My sorority nominated me for Miss Sam Houston [America] to represent them. I was a little hesitant at first because I didn't know anything about it. But with help of my [sorority] sisters, I kind of got more confident and just kind of practiced a little bit before I actually ran for the Miss Sam Houston [America title]. (Holly, 20, White, Student)

Holly credited her sorority sisters for nominating her to compete in her first pageant. She, too, built confidence in herself along the way leading up to the Miss Sam Houston competition in the America circuit. The title of Miss Sam Houston is a local city pageant affiliated with Sam Houston University. Like Tamron, Holly won the title on her first attempt. Like other non-Hispanic white contestants in this study, Holly indicated building more self-confidence than competing to break systems of oppression in this space expressed by Black participants.

The following quotes came from study participants who revealed that it was close family friends that encourage them to compete in pageantry. Ivy shared:

My dad has a friend, her name is Ms. Julie. She told my father about the [Miss Black Teen Houston pageant] that she thought I would do well in. I never thought about doing pageants. Ms. Julie was like, "I really think this would be good for Ivy and it'll get her to meet new people, it'll possibly open up some doors for her

to something in the future.” It wasn't until my dad introduced me to Ms. Julie, I was like, “Wow, this is really interesting!” It was something that inspired me from somebody else. My mom, she's a businesswoman and my dad's an engineer, so we don't have anyone in our immediate family that's in [pageantry]. But you know, I definitely think that having Ms. Julie there to kind of guide me, she was almost like a second mother in a way, having her there to kind of guide me through the pageant world was very interesting and it created a close bond between me and her. (Ivy, 30, Black, Nurse Practitioner)

Ivy was encouraged to compete in the Miss Black Teen Houston pageant by a close family friend. Her response was similar to that of other Black women in this study suggesting she never thought about competing in pageants before. It was Ms. Julie, the family friend, who introduced her to the “pageant world” and helped guide her through her pageant experience. Ms. Julie's impact was so significant that Ivy said she saw Ms. Julie as a second mother. While she did not indicate Ms. Julie's race, it is assumed that she, too, is a Black woman given that she had initially encouraged her to compete in this pageant geared toward Black teens. This excerpt reinforces the importance of Black women feeling inspired and being encouraged to participate in pageantry, spaces that have historically embraced whiteness, and breaking systems of oppression.

Like Ivy, Brandy was introduced to pageants by a close family friend. She said:

It was a combination of instances that piqued my interest. I had a family friend who had competed in pageants and she had mentioned it to me... Around the same time, I got one of those flyers in the mail advertising for Miss Houston Teen USA... I'm very religious and I believe in signals in the world. And I was like,

“Oh, this is such a crazy coincidence that she asked me randomly about it and I got this flyer, which I've never received before, so why not?” And that's kind of how I decided to do pageants. I had never thought about it before then... It really changed the trajectory of my life because I really didn't have that self-confidence or high self-esteem to believe in myself and really put myself out there and have a voice for myself... That's what made me get the pageant bug because I did win on my first try, which was a blessing. (Brandy, 27, Black, Lawyer)

Brandy suggested it was a combination of a close family friend mentioning pageants to her and receiving a flyer in the mail around the same time that interested her in competing. Looking back, she said pageants changed the trajectory of her life as it allowed her to improve her personal development. Before competing in pageants, she said she lacked the self-confidence to believe in herself but after competing it compelled her to “have a voice” for herself. At her first attempt at the Miss Houston Teen USA pageant, she won. As a Black woman, her response reinforced the theme of Black study participants stating they, too, had never thought about competing in pageants before and not believing in themselves. This may be due to the history of racism in mainstream pageants, lack of Black representation, and the promotion of Eurocentric beauty standards.

This next quote, from Rita, conveyed how she was recruited by a pageant director in a public setting. Rita explained:

I was at Dillard's trying on a dress when the director [for Miss Rio Grande Valley Teen USA] popped up and said, “Hey, would you be interested in competing?” And I was like, “Hmm, no.” But then my mom and I, we had always talked about

it because I had grown up watching Miss USA and Miss Universe with her. So, we had always said, “If it’s meant to be, it’ll come into your life.” And we’re like, “Well, maybe this is it.” And so, we gave it a shot. I knew absolutely nothing about what I was about to get into. But that’s how it started, in a Dillard’s dressing room. (Rita, Hispanic, Accountant, Former USA State Titleholder)

Rita watched the Miss USA and Miss Universe pageants on television with her mother growing up and had always talked about competing. When she was approached by the director, she said she was not interested in competing. However, after thinking it over with her mother, she decided to compete in the pageant the director oversaw in the USA circuit. After years of competing in Texas, Rita won a state pageant (outside of Texas) and competed at Miss USA. Rita’s response is similar to other study participants who identified as Hispanic, indicating that they had thought about competing growing up as they watched national pageants on television. This is a recurring theme that, like non-Hispanic white women, Hispanic women in this study also grew up wanting to compete and saw themselves in this space.

The three remaining participants in theme two, all of whom are women of color, highlighted the role their culture played in their desire to compete in a particular pageant system. Two of the participants also discussed how their mothers encouraged them to compete in these pageants to embrace their racial and cultural background. Further, they explained how their socio-economic position uniquely contributed to their experience in pageants in terms of scholarships and economic privilege.

Gloria was approached by the pageant director for the Miss Houston Latina pageant. Her ethnicity, as a Hispanic woman, was a motivating factor to compete in this type of pageant circuit. For example, she stated:

I started posting my pictures online and modeling, and then I got recruited [by the director of the Miss Houston Latina] and then it just went from there. ... The Latina system focuses on empowering young Latin women, just because, you know, Latin women, we have kind of a stereotype and a role in our culture that we're supposed to fit in. So that pageant just focuses on empowering Latin women to break away from the box that we're put in, in our culture, by our own people. ... After I won, I was like, "Okay, this is fun! Let me try it again." And it just encouraged me because I met so many like-minded women. I became stronger-minded. I became kinder. I just felt like I just became a more well-rounded person. (Gloria, 22, Hispanic, Student)

In her response, Gloria explained that there is a "stereotype" and "role" in her culture to which women are expected to adhere. She said the Miss Houston Latina pageant aimed to empower young Latina women to break from such expectations in her culture. After being recruited to compete in this pageant system, she said this experience inspired her to become "stronger-minded," kinder, and a more well-rounded person. She was the only Hispanic participant in this study to indicate breaking cultural norms as part of the pageant experience.

These final two narratives highlighted embracing one's cultural background. The following two participants shared how their cultural background played into the desire to compete and the role socio-economic status played in competing in pageantry. The first quote is

from the only Asian American participant in this study. Brenda explained how her mother encouraged her to participate in pageants that are geared toward Asian American teens.

It was definitely my mom who encouraged me to compete when I was a teenager.

So, the Teen pageants that I competed in were not necessarily part of a national circuit, they were more so part of a cultural organization in my local community, they were geared just for Asian American women. When I was about 13 or 14, my mom thought it would be a good idea for me to connect more with my ethnicity and my race and my culture. She definitely pushed me to dive into competing in those pageants. It was called Miss Teen Asian American Texas and Miss Teen Philippines Texas. So those were the two Teen pageants I competed in. But more recently, the primary reason why I started back up again, competing in the Miss category [in the America system] was the scholarship money. (Brenda, 23, Asian, Law Student)

Brenda said that participating in these pageants as a Teen was a way for her to better connect with her culture, ethnicity, and race. As a Miss contestant, she began competing in the America system mainly to earn scholarships, as she is currently attending law school. Brenda's response was similar to Gloria's in that the pageants they participated in were geared towards women of specific ethnicities. While the pageant system Gloria competed in aimed to empower Latina women and break away from traditional expectations posed on young Latina women, the pageant system Brenda competed in aimed to embrace and help connect contestants with their Asian American roots. This shows that pageantry can be used as a way to both reinforce and challenge traditional cultural ways of life.

Kiki, like Brenda, also credited her mother for introducing her to pageantry. Given her Nigerian background, Kiki explained that competing in pageantry in her culture was seen more so for the elite. Her parents, she said, provided the economic resources to compete because they could afford it.

We're Nigerian descent and so pageantry isn't anything that's big over there. Just kind of for the elite. I also have three older brothers. So, me being the youngest and being the only girl, my mom would pretty much go all out and do that whole thing. So, I was forced into it and I liked it. That's kind of what made me gain interest in it to begin with. For me, it was to win a crown. I have been previously successful at another system, the National American Miss, and in the Miss Teen USA system, I was second runner-up to Miss Houston Teen USA and Top 10 at Miss Texas Teen USA. Yeah, I like to win. (Kiki, 29, Black, Registered Nurse)

Despite her mother introducing Kiki to pageants, she did not compete in a specific pageant system geared toward her race or ethnicity. Kiki said pageantry is not popular in Nigeria and that it is more reserved for the elite. Given that she grew up in a higher income household, budgeting or competing for scholarships did not seem to be an issue for her family as her mother would “go all out” in preparing her for pageant competitions. By mentioning her Nigerian roots, Kiki never indicated feeling discouraged to compete. Rather, she was ultimately eager to win a crown.

It was indicated in this second overarching theme that study participants were encouraged to compete in pageantry. Among those who received flyers in the mail or saw advertisements on social media, they were more likely to compete in the Miss Texas USA circuit as this was the pageant system being advertised. Those contestants that were encouraged to compete by family

members, namely, mothers, were likely to enter either the America, USA, or both pageant circuits. Many of these mothers were likely to encourage their daughters to compete in pageantry in hopes of them becoming more presentable and polished. Further, many of these mothers were likely to play an active role in their daughter's pageant experience.

It was discovered in these two primary themes that race, among Black participants, played a role in feeling inspired to compete and those who were encouraged to participate in pageantry. It was clearly indicated through these narratives by Black women that their experiences varied from that of non-Hispanic white and Hispanic participants. Black participants were more likely than non-Hispanic white and Hispanic participants to say they did not see themselves ever competing or never thought about competing in a beauty pageant until they were inspired by someone or encouraged to compete. Most non-Hispanic white and Hispanic participants did not convey these same concerns. Rather, they were likely to say that they either thought about competing or dreamt of becoming Miss USA or Miss America one day. While most participants expressed watching pageants on television growing up, the desire to one day compete in a beauty pageant varied by race. Many of these Black women spoke upon breaking through ethnic stereotypes that non-Hispanic white and Hispanic women in this study were unfamiliar with due to their lived experiences in pageantry. Further, non-Hispanic white women may be driven by personal goals to compete as they shared wanting to improve their confidence and self-esteem. It is worth noting that the demographics in Texas may contribute to these feelings of Black women feeling discouraged from competing. While the population among non-Hispanic whites in Texas is the largest, the Hispanic population is the second largest group in Texas and is expected to surpass whites in the coming years. Among Blacks in Texas, the rate is

significantly lower than that of non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics. Further, women of all racial and ethnic backgrounds in this study acknowledge that non-Hispanic white contestants and titleholders are overrepresented in Texas pageantry. However, the rate of Hispanic contestants and titleholders, specifically in the USA system, has grown since the mid-2000s and continues to grow.

CHAPTER FOUR: RACIALIZED MOTIVES FOR COMPETING

This chapter examines participants' motives for competing in pageantry. C. Wright Mills (1940) posits motives are terms with which interpretation of conduct by social actors (e.g., contestants and titleholders) proceeds. Mills argues that motives can be both subjective and strategies for action. Similarly, Kenneth Burke (1950) argues that motives are social constructs through which actors impose meaning into situations. Motives articulated by pageant contestants and titleholders are socially situated actions rooted in their desire to compete. Women in this study negotiate factors that contribute to their desire to compete. Race also plays into women's motives to participate in pageantry. As outlined in this analysis, special attention is paid to the relationship between racial inequalities in pageantry and motives to compete particularly among women of color. There is a clear distinction of motives by women of differing race and ethnicities.

The chapter explores how race and ethnicity are negotiated as participants explain their motives for competing. Further, this chapter also pays special attention to attitudes and perceptions toward race and ethnicity in pageantry. As a follow-up question to what their motives were, participants were asked how race and ethnicity impact pageants. The responses were powerfully conveyed by Black women expressing the importance of racial and ethnic representation in pageantry that led them to compete. These participants acknowledge the lack of racial and ethnic representation of women of color in Texas pageantry and among judging panels. They spoke to not only the importance of representation of minority women in pageantry but also being a representation themselves for young minority women that have "similar features" and who can "identify" with them. A limited number of non-Hispanic white women

articulated the importance of diversity in pageantry and acknowledged that white women are overrepresented in Texas pageantry. This chapter also outlines responses from study participants that embrace whiteness and reinforce controlling images of Black titleholders.

This chapter is divided into four sections outlining the social processes that inform women's motivations to compete in pageantry and their sociological significance. The four themes consist of hyper-individualism, collectivist orientation, tokenism, and controlling images of Black titleholders.

The first theme, hyper-individualism, was noted mostly in the narratives from white participants. Hyper-individualism focuses on the self, its goals, and its pleasures (Berger 1986). Thus, white contestants explain that their motives for competing stem from personal development, meeting new people, or winning. Some Hispanic participants' narratives also fit into this theme. In Texas pageantry, Hispanic women are uniquely positioned in that they are largely represented in participation and among titleholders than any other minority group. This may be due to the high population rate of Hispanics in Texas that is expected to exceed that of whites in the coming years. Therefore, Hispanics participants' standpoint may be largely similar to whites.

The second section, titled Collectivist Orientation, was common in Black participants' narratives for competing and acknowledged racial barriers in this space. However, there is nuance in these data between Black women's individual goals and pursuing collective goals. This is central to Patricia Hill Collins' (1990; 2000) both/and perspective where Black participants are pursuing individual goals, some pursuing collective goals, and some pursuing both individual and collective goals. The third section explores the role of Tokenism. This

section examines Black women's discussions of feeling isolated, particularly during their experiences at the Miss Texas USA pageant. Many convey that only one Black contestant will make it into the Top 5 at the state pageant given this trend from previous years. Their competition, they say, are not the white contestants but rather the other Black women competing because they collectively know that only one will make it to the Top 5. The fourth and final section in this chapter is Controlling Images of Black Titleholders. The section consists of responses from participants, including narratives from former state titleholders, that reinforce controlling images of Black women in response to race and ethnicity in pageantry. The narratives, particularly from white participants, overlook the accomplishments of Black titleholders and argue it is more so their race that afforded them their titles.

Hyper-Individualism

A major theme that derives from these data is hyper-individualism. This concept asserts that motives manifest into individual autonomy, self-reliance, and independence (Borell 2021). Berger (1986) defines hyper-individualism as entirely concerned with the self, its goals, and its pleasures. This concept is a distinct construct that emerges from dominant white patriarchal cultures. The following narratives derive from non-Hispanic white and Hispanic participants about their motives to compete in pageantry. Many participants endorse values related to hyper-individualism. Interest and personal gain are strongly pronounced among white participants in this category.

White participants' individual motives are central to hyper-individualism such as improving their personal development and gaining self-confidence. Thus, their overall objective

for competing is more so driven by the self and their desire to fulfill their personal goals and pleasures in a dominant white patriarchal culture. For Amelia, she explains:

I think it was confidence. I remember I was very shy. I know my mom was always trying to work with me on that. And then I saw these women [competing] who weren't shy and I just, I wanted to be like that... I just remember wanting to make my mom and Nana very proud. ... It meant a lot to me. I just thought this is what makes a woman, to be able to do these kinds of things. If I could do these things, I'll be someone really special one day. If I won, it basically gave me value. I think I found a lot of value or I try to find my self-worth and self-value in competing well and winning. (Amelia, 27, White, Copywriter)

Amelia, a former Miss San Antonio USA, stated her motives for competing were seeking self-value and self-worth. In a social space that is highly gendered like pageantry, she believes what “makes a woman” is adhering to traditional beauty standards of what a white hegemonic society deems as beautiful and worthy. Lefebvre (1991) argues that spaces are produced and maintained through social conflicts that are inherently political and ideological. To Amelia this translates to becoming “someone special one day” if she can adhere to these standards.

Louise's motives reinforce hyper-individualism as they center on the self. She explains:

It was mainly just to try something new...and meet new friends. ... Also, to help my public speaking skills. I was extremely shy even in high school and I needed something to help propel me forward when it came to communication. (Louise, 25, White, Unemployed)

She endorsed values related to individualism as she discusses wanting to meet new people, overcome her shyness, and improve her public speaking skills. This is central to the many narratives of white contestants.

Findings among white participants on motives suggest improving personal development through overcoming shyness and gaining self-confidence. Savannah, who represented two state titles, expressed her motive to compete was to improve her self-confidence.

It was definitely self-confidence. I was very shy. So for me, it was putting myself in a position where I had to be on stage. I had to speak, I had to get involved in the community and just pushing myself. So that was the main objective. Later it became a love of community service. That's one of the things that I love about [pageants], you have this amazing platform. I can make a phone call now, as Miss Florida, to an organization. I'm like, "Hey, can we partner up to do something with kids." They're like, "Of course, Miss [Texas]! Let's make it happen!" And then we had this amazing event. But as just Savanna, I don't know if I could get the same energy [from an organization]. ... I've made a lot of friends through it and now it pushes me with having this amazing platform. (Savanna, 28, White, Sales Representative)

Savanna shared that in order to improve her self-confidence, she had to put herself in positions where she could be on stage and speak in front of a crowd. As a former Miss Texas and reigning titleholder in another state, her status in society grants her opportunities, prestige, and access to social networks. Status is the position in a social hierarchy that results from accumulated acts of deference (Goode 1978; Whyte 1943). For Savanna, her status as a white woman and as Miss

Texas put her in a position where she is embraced by the community because she is a public figure. Thus, her high-status tends to be noticed more often in this field (Goode 1978).

Many participants articulated being naturally competitive. For example, Sandra explained:

I had no idea what a pageant was. All I knew was that I was an extremely competitive dancer, and I was always performing. We competed in dance competitions. [Pageants] were just a different avenue. So, they said, “okay, well, if you want to do talent, you also have to do evening gown and you have to model and do interview.” I was like, “okay!” I love performing and it was just another avenue for me to continue to perform. (Sandra, 49, White, Accountant)

Competing in pageantry was another “avenue” for Sandra to perform her talent. Pageantry is gendered in that the competition involves different areas of competition including interview, swimsuit, and evening gown. These gendered displays are hyperfeminine as contestants are expected to be poised, well-spoken, adhering to Eurocentric beauty standards, and stage presence. According to Goffman (1979), gender display is a ritualized interactional language that characterizes women as child-like, appeasing, and psychologically disengaged in comparison to more powerfully positioned men. Thus, gender display is both reflective and reinforcing a social reality (Butkowski 2021; Goffman 1979). Sandra was told that she would have to wear an evening gown, model on stage, and interview in front of a panel of judges in order to perform her talent in beauty pageants.

While she enjoyed being onstage, Audrey says her motives go beyond this. She asserts:

I enjoyed being in front of people, even at a young age...but if we're being honest, my mom lived through me a little bit. She did not have a close relationship with her mother and she and I were close. I struggle with what it was like when I was young because if I didn't perform the way that she wanted me to, she would get upset. ... It was something my mom and I could do together and, in a way, I could make her happy through that. (Audrey, 50, White, Mom)

What motivated Audrey to compete was a combination of the enjoyment of being in front of people and her mother living through her when she was growing up. She states that her mother found happiness when Audrey competed well in pageants. If she did not perform well, she describes how her mother would become upset with her. Further, she expresses how she struggled with trying to please her mother and make her feel happy.

Diana's motive for competing was to break traditional stereotypes about women who compete in pageantry. Gender stereotypes are cultural constructs, shared at the societal level, and describes what [women] are known to be like, therefore, influences people's perceptions (Fiske 1998). She explained how pageants go beyond just looks, for most women, and to her, it's more about being one's authentic self.

My motivation was to break stereotypes. For me, it meant being my authentic self and showing the judges, the audience, and the world that this is who I am and maybe it fits this mold that you want and maybe it doesn't. ... For me, it was just always about this is who I am and this is what I have to offer and what I hope to do with the title. ... I think the biggest stereotype is the fact that we're stupid brats and that pageants are all we have going for us or our looks are all that we have

going for us, which is not true in most cases. I mean, some people will fit the stereotype, but some won't, it's up to those of us who don't fit the stereotype to try to break it and give the field a good name again. (Diana, 28, White, Medical Student)

Diana strived to break stereotypes of women who compete in pageants by being her “authentic self.” To be authentic is to be genuine. She was driven to challenge these stereotypes by being her authentic self, she says. Thus, showcasing how pageants go beyond just outward appearance and focusing on what women, like her, hope to fulfill as a titleholder.

Earlier in her interview, Abby shared her experience of being severely bullied in middle and high school. When the opportunity to compete in her first pageant arose, her motive was to share her story of being bullied.

Just wanting to have a vehicle to share my story and sort of wanting to see if this was the right path for me. [When I won], I felt like that was God's way of saying, “This is your path and stick with it. This is what I want for you to do. This is the message I want you to carry. So, this is my way of saying yes, keep going.” So that was sort of the motivation behind it. (Abby, 36, White, Marketing and Communications Director)

As a cancer survivor, Alice articulates her motive to compete in pageantry as a way for her to experience a sense of “normalcy” in her life after undergoing cancer treatment.

I had just gotten done with my cancer diagnosis and being cleared to compete. So, that was what motivated me when I was sick. I was told to remain and do normal things. I wasn't going to surround myself with the hospital. I wanted to try to be as

normal as I could when I was undergoing treatment as best I could. Even when I was sick, I competed in the pageant in a wig. I wasn't fully walking yet, but somehow or another, I walked on stage. I never let any of the judges or anybody know that I was going through what I was going through, but I had literally just left MD Anderson Cancer Center after getting chemo and went on to compete.

(Alice, 28, White, Business Owner)

As she was undergoing cancer treatment, Alice was advised by her doctors to maintain a sense of normalcy. Instead of being reminded of her medical treatments and being in the hospital, this sense of normalcy they recommended motivated her to compete in pageantry. She also recalls competing in a wig while she underwent chemotherapy.

Motives Among Hispanic Participants

Hispanic participants in this study are uniquely positioned in Texas pageantry. Of the motives they expressed as a minority group, there are nuanced when compared to Black participants. This reinforces the complexity of Hispanic contestants' responses to competing in pageantry despite being a marginalized group. In the Miss Texas USA system, Hispanic women are represented in both participation and among titleholders. As previously mentioned, the Hispanic population is expected to outpace that of whites in Texas in the coming years. Despite their ethnic history, Hispanic contestants' standpoint is largely similar to that of whites in this study as expressed through their motives.

When asked what her motives were for competing, Natalia explains:

The self-development part was a motivator. I've always been interested in doing [pageants] in high school. I did [Future Farmers of America] (FFA), I was very involved in it and I did a lot of the speaking competitions and was always in that kind of environment anyway. So, it just came naturally to me. And then the glitz and glam, like, the big pageant hair and the makeup and the pictures and the clothes and the image. The girls that you get to meet and the relationships that you get to create, that's what kept me going with it. But honestly, I just wanted to win and prove to myself that I could do it. (Natalia, 29, Hispanic, Account Manager)

Natalia's motives are consistent with that of white participants' indicating similar standpoints of aiming to improve "self-development." These motives emphasize the self, the self's goals and pleasures (Berger 1986). To fulfill these pleasures, Natalia says she wanted to win and prove to herself that she could do it.

Marisol, a former Miss Austin USA, says it was her mother who initially got her involved in pageantry. Marisol shares:

I was just extremely shy and unsure of myself. ... I don't think that I was motivated to compete in that first pageant. My mom felt like it was going to be a good opportunity for me to build some confidence and meet some girlfriends. ... So, she submitted my photo. Once I knew that I was in and that I was going to compete at Miss Texas [USA], and in those days it was still on T.V., I did get excited. (Marisol, 33, Hispanic, Marketing Director)

Marisol's motives encompassed gaining confidence and meeting new people. Her drive was rooted in the self as social barriers were not expressed in her response and perhaps not part of

her reality competing in Texas. This may be due to ethnic privileges Marisol and other Hispanic women have in Texas who compete in the USA circuit. This experience would lead Marisol to years of competing in the USA circuit, becoming Miss Austin USA, and making the Top 5 at Miss Texas USA.

Sonia's motives for competing continues the trend among Hispanic and white participants reinforcing the self. She says:

My very first [pageant] when I was a teen, I think ultimately it was to have fun and to feel beautiful and confident and really get out of my comfort zone. I've always been one who is adventurous and likes to do things that I haven't done before, or just a challenge... I love all things girly so it was a perfect outlet for me to express myself. (Sonia, 26, Hispanic, Business Owner)

Sonia discussed wanting to feel beautiful and to have fun. Her response echoes other participants' motives for seeking self-value and enjoyment in these spaces. Given that pageantry has traditionally embraced whiteness and European beauty standards, Sonia is adhering to these stands of beauty.

The final response comes from Maria. She explains:

I was always a competitive person. So, I kind of looked at it in that light. I just remember seeing all the other girls and thinking, "I want to make myself that polished. I want to be that refined. I want to be that well-spoken." I remember watching all of y'all and just thinking how behind I was. And I didn't even realize it, you know, just living my day-to-day life until I was exposed to pageants. So, it was kind of a multitude of things. It was the competitive side to me, of course I

wanted to win Miss San Antonio. Seeing the other women there, you know, wanting to be like them in a sense. I really just wanted to better myself because I saw the rest of everybody and I was just like, I really want to be on that level.

(Maria, 29, Hispanic, Engineering Designer)

Maria asserted that she is not only a competitive person and wanted to be Miss San Antonio USA, but that she was also enamored of the other women she was competing with and wanted to emulate the same qualities they possessed. Her drive continues the trend as many others as it is rooted in a sense of self. Further, she aims to mimic other women she competed with, presumably white women, in a social space that embraces a white patriarchal culture.

Importance of Diversity

Diversity is an emerging theme among some white participants. The following responses convey the importance of diversity and the lack of racial and ethnic representation in Texas pageantry. Some argue that in order for pageants to remain relevant in society, they must be diverse. Participants argue that if white women are consistently competing and winning, pageants are viewed irrelevant in society and out of touch as this does not reflect all women in the U.S.

The following narratives by white women express the importance of diversity in pageantry. While the definition of diversity is unclear in the literature, Herring (2009) defines it as policies and practices that seek to include people who are considered different from traditional members. Thus, diversity aims to create an inclusive culture that values and uses the talents of all would-be members (Herring 2009). Participants acknowledge that non-Hispanic whites are

overrepresented in terms of participation and among past titleholders in Texas pageantry. Racial oppression is deeply ingrained in U.S. historical narratives and is operational throughout societal levels such as group relations, institutions, organizations, and power structures (Feagin and Elias 2013). These participants elaborate on the lack of diversity in pageantry while acknowledging that white women are overrepresented in this space.

Scarlett asserted the importance of diversity in pageantry on a national scale, not just in Texas, indicating that:

I think that particularly on a national level, [pageants] try to be a representation of all of America, for example, Miss America. ... I do believe that at some point that race comes into play because if you consistently had white women [winning] all of these years, if you were trying to remain relevant in society, you can't just represent one race, you have to be diverse. (Scarlett, 41, White, Journalist)

Scarlett acknowledges the complexity of this space that privileges white women, therefore, does not represent the makeup of America. She states that in order for pageants to persist and remain relevant, contestants and titleholders need to be racially and culturally diverse. Scarlett and other participants speak to the importance of diversity in pageantry.

Louise, who competed in both pageant systems, argued that the Miss America circuit is less diverse compared to the Miss USA system. She stated:

I see more diversity in the USA system than I do in the American system. ... When you think of Miss America, it's more of an American thing where you envision girls that are brunette with brown eyes and they'll walk on stage, and then you'll see blondes with blue eyes walking on stage. You don't typically see, I

mean, in recent years we have seen a lot more people of African descent walk on stage and that's been wonderful. ... But you don't really see any Indian women up there or Asian women. It'd be really nice to see more diversity in Miss America.

(Louise, 25, White, Unemployed)

Western societal standards of beauty are often based on a White, European ideal of attractiveness, indicating that skin color can play a significant role in how beautiful or attractive individuals are perceived (Bryant 2013; Silvestrini 2020). Louise argues that from her experience competing in the Miss America system, it tends to uphold whiteness and lacks diversity. She says when you think of the Miss America, it is an American tradition, thus, one envisions blondes and brunettes competing on stage. She does acknowledge that in recent years more Black women are competing. But based on her experience competing in both pageant circuits, she says it is more diverse in the USA system than in the America circuit and less culturally diverse with Asian and Indian representation.

As a former Miss San Antonio USA, Marybeth believes pageants are becoming more diverse and moving in a direction that promotes relatability among contestants and titleholders.

There's so many different races winning titles and I think opening doors and pushing barriers for girls being like, "Hey, I look like her and I can see myself in her in that role." I think times are really changing with that and [pageants] are really becoming so diverse, so many different ethnicities are winning, but before there used to be almost one type of girl that would win, I don't think now that's the case. (Marybeth, 28, White, Sports Reporter)

Marybeth indicates that in the past, “one type of girl” would traditionally win implying white women. White women are privileged in this space because societal beauty standards influence what constitutes as attractive and aesthetically pleasing, therefore, perpetuated through T.V. shows, advertisements, music videos, fashion trends, and other forms of mass media and commercial influences (Sekayi 2003; Silvestrini 2020). Marybeth acknowledges that pageants today are becoming more diverse. Her response stands out from the others’ as she was the only participant to highlight the impact of participation among women of color has on other minority women suggesting it pushes barriers and allows them to see themselves in this gendered and racialized space.

Collectivist Orientation: Black Women’s Motives

This category derives from narratives by Black participants about their motives for competing in pageantry. Their motives in conjunction to the importance of racial representation is reinforced in many of these responses. Thus, collectivist orientation recognizes structural barriers that impact racial groups. The Black women in this study discuss racial barriers and inequalities contributing to their motives to compete. Black women's location within the intersection of race and gender provides a unique angle from which to not only understand anti-blackness but also to work for social change (Bell et al. 2021; Collins 1990; 2000). Many of these women articulate the importance of racial presentation in a space where non-Hispanic white women are overrepresented. For generations, it has been documented the significant differences in perspectives and lived experiences of Black and white women (Collins 1990; 2000; Cooper

1998; hooks 1994). In the following narratives, many Black participants report pursuing individual goals, collective goals, or pursuing both individual and collective goals.

Black women's motives are nuanced in these data given that motives, collectively, consist of personal development and resistance to the status quo. This nuance connects with Patricia Hill Collins' both/and conceptual orientation. Collins' (1990; 2000) asserts that this orientation views thought and action as part of the same process. Further, she states that Black women should embrace a both/and conceptual orientation as this encompasses Black women's experiences as being Black and being a woman (Collins 1990; 2000). Black women in this study pursue individual goals and others both personal and collective goals for competing in pageantry. Thus, these collective goals, for Black participants, are racial goals.

In this first quote, Porsha's motive for competing is driven by personal development. She explains that her motive to compete stems from personal gain and proving to herself that she could compete and be selected to win.

It was more for myself. It was to prove to myself that I can actually do something, that I can actually be picked for something. It kind of stems more from when I was younger, not getting picked for things, not being voted "Most Likely" to be anything or do anything. And it was honestly something more for me to say that I did this, somebody picked me because I deserved to be here. (Porsha, 27, Black, Registered Nurse)

Porsha expressed her motivation to compete was more for herself, challenging herself to compete and proving to herself that she deserves to be in this racial and gendered space. In such a setting like pageantry, a spatial perspective on race can provide a useful lens for understanding racism

and its persistence (Burrell-Craft 2020). Porsha overcame the history of racial barriers by becoming the first Black woman to represent her local city title at the Miss Texas USA pageant.

Like Porsha, Ivy's motive to compete was also to prove herself. She discussed how her involvement in pageantry stems from personal development and a desire to gain confidence in herself and to prove to herself that she could accomplish her goal of competing in pageantry. She stated:

It was more so to build more confidence in myself and to prove to myself that if I could do this and win, or even if I don't win, I pretty much can do anything that I put my mind to...I really wanted to set a goal and even if I didn't place, at least I did something that I can be proud of later in life. I think that was a huge motivating factor. And I made some friends that I'm still friends with today. So just the relationships that you build going into this type of industry, I feel like that's a huge reward in itself. (Ivy, 30, Black, Nurse Practitioner)

While proving oneself continues as a common theme within personal development, building relationships is another pattern that emerged in these data. Ivy discussed competing at the Miss Black Houston Teen pageant where she interacted and competed with other young Black women in a space that was established to embrace Black women and Black culture.

Kiki's motive for completing stems her success competing in pageants. She states:

For me, it was to win a crown. I have been previously successful at another system, the National American Miss, and in the Miss Teen USA system, I was second runner-up to Miss Houston Teen and Top 10 at Miss Texas Teen USA.

Yeah, I like to win. (Kiki, 29, Black, Registered Nurse)

Kiki's participation in pageantry reinforces a common theme among Black participants of racial representation in pageants. Another common theme her response speaks to is the lack of racial representation among titleholders. While Kiki has been successful in advancing into the Top 10 and Top 5 in pageant competition, she did not win even though winning was her motive. In fact, she may have been the only Black woman in these placements thus supporting the argument Black women have expressed in this study of tokenism (explored further in the coming section).

Like Kiki, Kandi's motive was to also win because she considers herself to be competitive. Her motive goes beyond just being competitive as she describes a number of factors that led her to compete.

I'm really competitive. So, the first motivating factor was to win the crown. I also wanted to just gain more confidence in myself. I also learned that there was a scholarship award. That was my third motivating factor because I was starting to think about college and thought that'd be awesome if I won scholarship money.

(Kandi, 32, Black, Senior Onboard Specialist)

Of the women in this study, the majority have pursued higher education. For Kandi, her motives were to also improve her personal develop and win scholarship money for college. While she did not come from a lower income household growing up, Kandi's response suggests that in addition to winning, she discussed wanting to be financially prepared for college by competing to win scholarships.

As a figure skater growing up, Brandy says she was always a "competitive spirited person." When she decided to stop competing in skating competitions, she gave pageants a try. Brandy stated:

I grew up a figure skater, so I was already a very competitive spirited person. And I had just recently decided to stop competing in skating competitions. So it came across and I guess across a combination between my competitive nature and wanting to try something new and just feeling like it was meant to be. I really didn't know anything about pageants, so when it came down to scholarship money and what a titleholder would even do, I had no clue. I just was like, "I want to do a pageant!" (Brandy, 27, Black, Lawyer)

Like Kandi, Brandy's motive was a combination of being a competitive person and wanting to try something new. While she is perusing individual goals, Brandy's motive and other Black women's motives are rooted in collective goals. She says she has always been competitive and wanted to compete for scholarships. Her experience and motives reflect that of the lived experiences of other Black participants. She would become the first Black woman to win her title in the USA circuit.

Janelle's motive for competing was the opportunity to share her platform of parental incarceration. This was quite personal for Janelle as she shares her own experience and struggles growing up with an incarcerated parent. While she was the only participant in this study to convey how personal her platform was and publicizing adverse experiences, she did indicate that this experience led her to pursue a career in law.

It was actually my platform, [pageants] gave me a platform to talk about parental incarceration. My dad has been in prison since I was 12. So, it was something that really debilitated me and I felt like, "okay, if I can do this and overcome it and actually talk about it, then I can do anything." (Janelle, 27, Black, Lawyer)

For Janelle, her motive for competing stems from personal adverse experiences of parental incarceration. Since she was 12 years old, her father has been incarcerated. The United States is home to the largest incarcerated population (O'Brian 2020; Walmsley 2018). Further, Black Americans are far more likely to be incarcerated than non-Hispanic whites (O'Brien 2020; Shannon et al., 2017). Her drive to compete allowed her to share her experience that disproportionately affects Black Americans. This is another example of Collins' (1990; 2000) both/and perspective as she seeks to share her experience as a daughter of someone who is incarcerated, overcame these adverse experiences, and hope to normalize it in a space that is overwhelmingly representative of whites.

Brenda, a former Miss Dallas, shared her motive to compete was less self-driven and more about paving the way for other young women of color who look like her.

One of the primary reasons I compete is because when I was young, I was hesitant to compete because I didn't really see anybody who looked like me on stage or who held a title that had similar features as I do. So, I thought to myself, "If not me, then who?" So that's why I started competing. ... I think pageants impact the way that women of color see themselves. Women of color specifically have their own perceptions of the pageant system. I feel like I have to work harder in comparison to the other candidates who sort of fit that historic notion of what Miss America should look like. And I know...that other women of color feel the same, too, that they feel that there's a little bit more of a burden to prove themselves. And it's really unfortunate because I don't think there's a solution other than continuing to compete and to change those notions within the game. I can

definitely attest that I feel like I have to work a little bit harder. I feel that I have to take on a heavier burden than most girls as we have such an important message that we want to share. We feel more pressure to be successful in the system.

(Brenda, 23, Asian, Law Student)

Brenda, an Asian-American, shares her experience growing up, stating that she was hesitant to compete in pageantry because the women she saw competing and winning did not look like her nor did they share the same features as her. She conveyed a compelling point, “if not me, then who?” For years, pageants have reinforced whiteness in the women who not only complete but the type of women who consistently win. Since its inception in 1921, the Miss America Organization had not crowned a woman of color until 1983 (Watson and Martin 2004).

Brenda states that pageants impact the way in which women of color see themselves, therefore, they have to “work harder” to overcome those racial and ethnic barriers. If women of color do not see racial and ethnic representation in pageantry, they may feel such a space is not welcoming to them. In Western society, representations of women of color are continually positioned across from, against, in reflection to white or dominant cultural norms and people (Narayan 1997). Thus, Brenda aims to change the notions of standards of beauty and participate in this space that historically privileges whites. Brenda also states that she and other women of color take on a “heavier burden” than their white counterparts because they are trying to fulfill this mission to be a representative for all women of color.

Women of color in this section convey a collectivist orientation to compete in pageantry. This is rooted in both personal motives and racial and ethnic representation for women that look

like them. The following section focuses on the role of tokenism in Texas pageantry and the experiences of Black contestants in competition with one another than their white counterparts.

Tokenism

In the following narratives, Black women express an unspoken rule during their experience competing at Miss Texas USA that only one Black contestant will make it into the Top 5. Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism argues that the rarity of tokens sets in motion a series of social processes that create more stress, isolation, and barriers to career mobility for them than non-tokens. This concept goes beyond just numbers thus social status contributes to tokenism. Yoder and colleagues (1991; 1996) argue that females, racial and ethnic minorities, and members of the lower class are associated with greater token effects. Women of color experience token fatigue centering on their perceptions and experiences and illuminating the penalty of working in spaces that are occupied by whites (Shim 2021). Shim (2021) argues that token fatigue results from the tolls of energy, resources, time, and health of women of color working in white dominated spaces. This is consistent with the experiences of Black women who compete in spaces over representative of white women.

Janelle discusses having to compete harder than that of her white counterparts because traditionally only one Black contestant will make it into the Top 5 at Miss Texas USA.

This year, we had the rarity of having a Black Miss USA, Miss Universe, and Miss Teen USA. That is something completely rare. I've never seen that before and didn't expect it. But at the state level, I feel like race plays a very big role. I know that through my experience and some of the experiences of my other

African American friends, we know that only one Black girl is making it into Top 5. They're never going to pick two or more. And we know that we have to work ten times harder than everybody else. We can't just look like your everyday Black girl; we have to be all around beautiful. (Janelle, 27, Black, Lawyer)

Janelle shared in her interview how surprised she was when Black women occupied the titles of Miss USA and Miss Universe simultaneously as this had never happened before, nor did she expect it given the history of whiteness occupying these titles. She discussed her own experience and other Black women's experiences competing at Miss Texas USA that only one Black contestant will make it into the Top 5. This demonstrates tokenism, defined as numeric minorities in segregated occupations often face isolation and obstacles of advancement in the workplace, thus, resulting in their low status in the larger society (Kanter 1977; Turco 2010; Yoder 1994). In the case of the Miss Texas USA pageant, this may be the organization's attempt to show relevance and "diversity" despite its poor history of racial representation, especially among titleholders. Thus, from Janelle's experience and the experiences of other Black contestants at Miss Texas USA, there is only one Black woman who will make it into the Top 5 but will not win the title. Because of this, Black women have to work and prepare harder than white and Hispanic contestants due to racial barriers.

From her experience, Janelle believes that two or more Black women will never advance into the Top 5 at the state pageant. It is her understanding that Black women must work harder than their white counterparts and that Black women in pageantry must be beautiful all around. As mentioned in various interviews with white women, contestants and the judging panel lack racial representation. Thus, this may be a contributing factor to tokenism. First, Black women may see

that Black women are not winning nor placing in the Top 5 as much as white and Hispanic women. Second, Black women may question, since the judging panel lacks racial representation, if the selection committee would even select a Black woman to win. Many participants have shared this same statement, that Black contestants must be competitive in all areas of a competition, thus, they must speak well and adhere to beauty standards.

Contestants discussed how Texas pageantry is nuanced. Ivy explains how Texas is the “mecca” of all beauty pageants, however, Black women are underrepresented.

Texas is an interesting state because Texas is the mecca of beauty pageants in the beauty pageant world. There has not been many Black Miss Texas titleholders or Black Miss USA’s or Miss America’s. I don't know if it's because of the fact that we are not competing as much. In recent years it does feel like there's more representation of women of color, at least from what I've seen. I think that's amazing because beauty comes in all shapes, sizes, ethnicities, and I think it's amazing for different organizations to understand that there's not just one type of pageant winner, we all have different looks. So, I feel like they're starting to catch on. I'm seeing more women of color win all these pageants and it's inspiring, but I felt like for so long, at least in Texas, the winner is usually blonde hair, blue eyes.

(Ivy, 30, Black, Nurse Practitioner)

Ivy’s response reinforces the concept of tokenism because while she acknowledges that there is a dearth of racial representation among Texas titleholders, she argues that there should not be one type of pageant winner. She says in Texas the winner is usually someone with blonde hair and blue eyes. She questions if the lack of racial representation is attributed to Black women not

getting selected by the judges to win because they are Black or because Black women are just not competing. She is not alone in this statement as other participants have questioned why there is so little representation in women of color competing and winning.

Kandi, who was the first Black teen to win her title in the USA system, said there has never been another Black teen to win this same title since then (at the time of her timer).

When I first competed, I was the first and only Black Miss San Antonio Teen USA. There hasn't been another one since me... Most of the time when you think of beauty, you think of blonde, blue eyes, and tall. I think the standard of beauty has definitely changed, which is great for a lot of women of color, but also other women that look different than that, they break the mold of that. (Kandi, 32,

Black, Senior Onboard Specialist)

Kandi echoes similar statements regarding the significance of racial representation and breaking the mold of traditional beauty standards. As the first Black Miss San Antonio Teen USA, she acknowledges that there has not been another Black titleholder since then in over a decade. Further, she argues that the standard of beauty has changed from blonde hair and blue eyes and that women of color are breaking those traditional standards by competing in pageantry. Thus, their participation promotes a perception of what beauty is that goes beyond traditional beauty standards and embraces multiculturalism.

Raven also argues similar sentiments about the lack of Black representation among titleholders, therefore, leading Black women to feel discouraged to compete in pageantry overall. She describes her experience being one of the only two Black women competing in a pageant that she won.

For me, I was one of the only two Black girls competing in our pageant... After I won, I heard from a lot of people say they're really glad that I won. A lot of Black girls were saying that they have thought about competing in pageants but they weren't sure if it was for them or if the judges would allow a Black girl to win. It's really disheartening to hear things like that. I know that a lot of Black girls are discouraged when it comes to competing in pageants. Hopefully with us having a Miss Universe from South Africa and then last year's Miss America, and Miss Teen USA and Miss USA, all being African American, that they see their representation there and they see that it is possible. (Raven, 21, Black, College Student)

When Raven won a local city title in the America circuit, she conveys how other Black women expressed excitement for her. She recalls hearing that Black women often entertain the idea of competing in pageants but feel discouraged because they are unsure if the selection committee would even "allow a Black girl to win." With the recent shift in racial representation of Black women winning national and international titles, this may encourage women of color to compete and believe they have a chance at winning. Being one of very few Black city titleholders and hearing other Black women feeling discouraged from competing, Raven may have experienced isolation and additional racial barriers to advance at the state pageant in this space that is occupied by white women.

Brandy recalled a time when she heard someone say that the selection committee would not choose a Black woman to represent the title she was competing for. This turned out to not be the case for her because Brandy won, making her the first Black teen to win this USA title.

I remember as a Teen, someone mentioned that the [judges] wouldn't pick a Black person to win the title...I was actually the first African American to win the title of Miss Houston Teen USA... In my experience, I feel like I have achieved a very monumental moment because I was able to break that barrier as a Teen. Years later, I was able to introduce pageants to another young African American girl who was the first African American to win the title of Miss Texas Teen USA. For me, it's empowering to see it be done and having some sort of influence in that.

(Brandy, 27, Black, Lawyer)

Here, Brandy conveyed the importance of breaking racial barriers. Despite not feeling discouraged from competing in pageantry after hearing from someone that the selection committee would not choose a Black woman to win, she won and became the first Black woman to win the title. Additionally, she introduced pageantry to a young Black woman who would later become the first Black Miss Texas Teen USA. Brandy overcame racial barriers as well as influenced others who look like her to compete. While she was the first Black woman to win her title, she may have faced other difficulties as a Black woman in a space largely occupied by white women. Brandy's response is imperative because she suggests that if Black women do not compete, they will not win. If they compete in pageantry, they have a chance of winning than if they did not compete.

Porsha acknowledged the profound shifts in, not only, racial and ethnic representation but gender identity in pageantry, as well. She states:

I do see more races that are in pageants because representation is starting to become big especially since 2010. I mean this previous decade has really

changed. It shed light on having more Black girls in the forefront, more Asian girls in the forefront, even trans women in the forefront, all these different demographics that were not necessarily considered the norm or the staple for pageantry are kind of not necessarily getting pushed out, but they're starting to make more room for others. I know a lot of minorities are starting to see that. And so, they're not as afraid anymore to compete. They're wanting to try it now because they think that now they truly have a chance. (Porsha, 27, Black, Registered Nurse)

Porsha reinforced a common theme among some study participants that women of color, particularly Black women, are no longer afraid to compete because they “truly have a chance” of winning. Women of color, especially Black women, may feel more encouraged to compete and believe they can win given the recent success of minority women competing and winning state, national, and global titles especially in mainstream pageantry. With greater racial and ethnic representation, this could eliminate obstacles and feelings of isolation among Black contestants and titleholders and close the racial gap in Texas pageantry.

Kiki recalled feeling alienated because she is Black during her interview with the judges at the Miss Texas USA pageant. She explained:

My last year competing, I did not feel like Texas was very progressive. The reason why I say that is because at Miss Texas USA, they break the girls up into groups. Depending on where you are in that interview group, you get to hear quite a few interviews before yours. I was the only Black girl within my interview group. So, when it was my turn to be interviewed, one of the judges asked me

what did I think about Colin Kaepernick kneeling and about Black Lives Matter.

... I felt like that was a very racially and politically charged question. And I actually am not adverse to those questions being asked in a pageant realm because that still is something that we're going through now. And I think that a Miss Texas USA or Miss USA would need to be prepared to answer that type of question. But I do feel that that should not be an alienating question. Meaning if you're going to ask a question that has that high of implications, depending on how you answer it, everyone should be asked that question. It definitely did make me feel kind of excluded and kind of pinpointed that I was the only person in my group who was asked that question. (Kiki, 29, Black, Registered Nurse)

As the only Black contestant in her interview group at the Miss Texas USA pageant, Kiki felt alienated because of the racially and politically charged questions she was asked by the panel of judges. These questions involved Black Lives Matter and Colin Kaepernick kneeling which she was not adverse to responding to. However, she felt alienated because her white counterparts in her same interview group were not asked these same questions. She acknowledges the importance of speaking on issues about racial inequalities and conveyed the importance for any titleholder to be prepared to respond to these questions. Given the overwhelming response by participants about the lack of racial representation among the selection committee, it is fair to suggest that the person or persons asking her these questions were likely white. Thus, the panel of white judges are scoring her on her response, as a Black woman, to questions involving racial and social justice. This is an example of Kiki feeling like a token as she felt alienated from her white counterparts because she was asked racially charged questions. Had Kiki been white it is

unlikely she would have been asked about Black Lives Matter and sports figures kneeling during the national anthem.

Tamron, a former Miss Houston USA, explains that the Miss Texas USA circuit has not crowned a Black woman in nearly thirteen years at the time of her interview. While she is thrilled about the racial representation among the 2019 Black titleholders at the national and global levels, she voiced concern about the amount of attention that was focused on their race and less about who these women are and their accomplishments. Tamron stated:

I think it's so great that just recently Miss USA, Miss Universe, they are all Black women. I loved it because I'm a Black woman. ... This is not something that should be like, "Oh my gosh, they're all Black, they're all Black!" Why can't we celebrate that they are women? It's so sad that we have to do that because Black women have been shunned for years. And even with Miss Texas USA, a Black woman has not won in 13 years. (Tamron, 26, Black, Human Resources Director)

Tamron asserted that much attention is focused on a Black titleholders' race rather than her accomplishments. When a white woman wins a national or global title, her race is not mentioned because her race is part of the legacy of beauty pageants. Indeed, when Black women won, especially in 2019, so much attention was focused on their race and less about who they are and their accomplishments. Further, media coverage on the 2019 Black titleholders focused more so on these women choosing to wear their hair naturally during the competition and less about who they were. For example, Miss USA 2019, Cheslie Kryst, holds a Master of Business Administration degree and Juris Doctor degree. This lack of recognition applies to tokenism because when a Black woman wins, based on Tamron's quote, she does not receive the same

recognition as a white titleholder. Further, this takes recognition away from Black titleholders' accomplishments and getting to know who they are. Thus, Black titleholders may feel alienated and viewed lower in status in society compared to white titleholders. Like other study participants, she explained the lag in racial representation in the Texas USA circuit as there has not been a Black woman to hold the title since 2007.

Ebony shared her first experience competing at Miss Texas America. While she earned a spot in the Top 5 on her first attempt at the crown, she describes how her experience goes beyond just placing in the Top 5 at Miss Texas America.

I went to Miss Texas America and had the time of my life. I was fourth runner-up and that's huge. I mean, huge! That first go around was a whirlwind and I wouldn't trade that experience for the world. . . . After my first time competing, the biggest thing that I realized was that competing in a pageant was less about me and more about being a representation for other young girls and young women who looked like me, who didn't see themselves in that space and thriving in that space. That honestly was the biggest drive for me to continue to compete and to continue to be involved in pageants. (Ebony, 25, Black, Health Promotions Specialist)

Like many Black women in this study, Ebony also shared the importance of racial representation in pageantry. She was the only Black contestant who placed in the Top 5 at Miss Texas America. She conveys that while her placement in the pageant was a major accomplishment, it was more about being a representation for other young women who look like her. Further, she notes that her participation in pageantry is largely to convince Black women that they, too, can thrive in

this space. After her first attempt at the crown, she says that being representation for other women is her motivation to continue competing in pageants.

This final quote comes from Diana, a white participant, who discussed racial quotas in her response to the impact of race and ethnicity in pageantry. She stated:

There's still predominantly white women in Texas [pageantry]. There's definitely some Latinas and African Americans. There's not a lot of Asian Americans. It's interesting to me because it does still seem to be not super diverse, but it's getting more diverse. ... What I find frustrating is when, even my own family or my own friends, you watch a pageant on TV, and you're coming up with who you think your Top 15 are going to be. A lot of times I've heard people say things like, "This Black girl is prettier than that Black girl. So, it's probably gonna be her." And I'm like, "Well, why are you putting a quota on it?" I feel like it's still a numbers game, you don't say the same thing about this blonde is prettier than that blonde or this white girl is prettier than that white girl." (Diana, 28, White, Medical Student)

While Diana argued that Texas pageantry is getting more diverse, white women are overrepresented. She questioned how her family and friends perceive Black contestants competing and rating them over one another as if there is a quota or it is a "numbers game" associated with Black contestants. This statement is very compelling and consistent with tokenism where only one Black contestant will make it into the Top 5 at the state pageant. Thus, among Black contestants, their competition are other Black contestants competing for that one spot in the Top 5 as opposed to their white and Hispanic counterparts. This notion further

reinforces this idea of tokenism in Texas pageantry, suggesting that it shows a pattern that this perception exists among both Black and white contestants.

Tokenism is a reoccurring theme in these data from Black participants' narratives about the Miss Texas USA pageant. It is conveyed in their quotes that there tends to be only one Black woman that makes it into the Top 5. Thus, Black participants argued that their competition are the other Black women because the Black contestants know only one will make it to the Top 5. One contestant argued that this does not suggest that she may win given that it has been thirteen years since a Black woman has won the Miss Texas USA title. Further, others asserted that Black women must work harder than their white counterparts because they are Black. Because white women are overrepresented in this pageant and among Texas titleholders, Black women do not see white women as competition like they do other Black contestants. Perceptions of race in pageantry, especially among Black titleholders, is conveyed in the following section as white participants use controlling images to negotiate the ways in which they perceive the accomplishments of Black titleholders.

Controlling Images of Black Titleholders

In this section, responses come mostly from study participants that reinforce controlling images of Black women in response to race and ethnicity in pageantry with the exception of one. Scholars have posited numerous studies on a myriad of narratives created to define Black women in society. These narratives include but are not limited to being too masculine, overly aggressive, hypersexual and promiscuous, "Superwomen," "workhorses," and many others (Collins 2002; Commodore et al. 2020; hooks 1999; White 2010). These representations assert certain assumed

qualities attached to Black women and how these qualities justify oppression (Collins 1990; 2000). Collins argues that such images, such as mammies, Jezebels, breeder women of slavery, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and welfare mothers, applied to African American women has been fundamental to Black women's oppression. Thus, these negative stereotypical images are designed to keep Black women in an assigned, subordinate place (Collins 1990; 2000). The following responses, made by primarily non-Hispanic white women, discount Black women's achievements in mainstream pageants and use controlling images to justify their argument.

Dominique recalled competing with a white woman who made assumptions about her and her culture all because she is Black. She stated:

I had an unpleasant experience while I was competing in Mrs. Texas International. The night of preliminaries, the contestant behind me in the lineup... She said to me, "Do you like watermelon?" And I said, "What?" She had a very heavy Texas accent. And I said, "No, I don't. Why do you ask me that?" The other contestants that were around us listening, they all looked at her. She goes, "Oh, but you must like fried chicken." And I said, "Nope, not really." I said, "But why, why you asked me that?" And she said, "But your kind like fried chicken and watermelon." And I said, "My kind?" And then it hit me. Cause I was so focused on anything else but her, it hit me that she was being racist! And she said, "Where I live, all of your people like watermelon and fried chicken." And I said, "Well, I don't know that my people, my relatives live where you live." And even though I knew what she meant, I thought I'd just spin it another way so that I wouldn't come out of character for myself. And I stayed quiet. ... It reminded me that there

were still idiots out there and one was standing behind me. But when I won the pageant, they told me that she walked off the stage. ... The pageant director said, "I'm so sorry, are you okay? Please know that we don't feel this way." And I already knew that, I knew the director wasn't that kind of person. (Dominique, 56, Black, Business Owner)

Dominique's interaction with the other contestant, who is white, assigned her to stereotypical images because she is Black. The white contestant overlooked Dominique's accomplishments as both were vying for the title of Mrs. Texas International. Such racist comments in this space where white women are overrepresented reinforces racial barriers experienced by Black women.

Overlooking the racial barriers Black women have encountered in American beauty pageants, Savanna, a former Miss Texas America and state titleholder in the USA system in another state, reinforces controlling images of Black women in her response.

I think lately you've been seeing a lot of African American girls that have been taking away all these titles, because I think that there's, I don't know how to say this without sounding racist or whatever, but I feel like there's a certain boldness that when an African American woman speaks, like she's not going to be apologetic about what she believes. As a Caucasian girl, I have grown up kind of monitoring everything that I say because of the way it might sound. So, I think that has actually helped them because they're able to speak their minds super freely. ... They're able to have that voice and be very powerful with it. (Savanna, 28, White, Sales Representative)

This quote reinforces controlling images of Black women as Savanna articulates “not wanting to sound racist” while also overlooking the accomplishment of Black women titleholders. Instead of referring to these women winning the titles fairly, she states that African American “girls” have been “taking away” such titles as opposed to earning or rightfully winning these titles. One would wonder, who exactly are Black women taking them away from given the rooted racial inequalities in pageants and lack of racial and ethnic representation in pageantry? Further, she describes Black titleholders’ speech as “unapologetic,” “boldness,” and a way for them to “speak their minds super freely” that could reinforce the stereotype of the overly aggressive Black woman. She says, in contrast, that she as a “Caucasian” woman grew up monitoring her speech so it is not taken out of context. Finally, Savanna’s argument here assumes Black women are privileged in that they can “speak their minds super freely” while she, a white woman, is oppressed because she must monitor what she says.

In the following response to race and ethnicity in pageantry, Claire, a former Miss Texas USA, suggests that she does not support the direction in which pageantry is going right now despite greater racial and ethnic representation at the nation and global level among contestants and titleholders.

I don't really love the way that pageants are going right now. I just feel like it's all about race or your background or what kind of sob story you have. It's no longer about, are you the best person for the job? I don't really think that people should judge and make decisions based off the color of your skin. I think it should be just the best person for the job in that moment. (Claire, 25, White, Realtor)

Claire's opinion suggested that she feels threatened by the direction in which pageants are going as women of color are becoming more and more representative in national and international pageants. She said that pageants today are all about race and individuals' "sob" stories. Given that American pageantry, such as the Miss American Organization, have historically blocked women of color from participating in competitions, this space has been occupied by white women as it favors whiteness and European beauty standards. Indeed, pageantry is about race given its history of the overrepresentation of white women and lack of racial and ethnic representation and systemic racism. Claire, however, believes white women are threatened by this recent shift in racial and ethnic representation. She, a former state titleholder, ignores and overlooks the racial barriers experienced by Black contestants because, as a white woman who has been previously successful in Texas pageantry, that is not her reality. Further, she suggested that, in addition to race, pageants are now all about an individual's "sob" story. This goes back to Janelle's quote about her platform of parental incarceration. Claire argued these personal stories, such as Janelle's adverse experiences, are "sob" stories. On the contrary, Janelle seeks to inform her community about parental incarceration as a titleholder and that she was able to overcome this experience which led her to pursue a career as a lawyer.

The following statement from Rita, a former USA state titleholder, asserted that pageant systems have a political agenda they adhere to when crowning women of color.

I think today's culture, you just never know what kind of political agenda an organization has. It's no secret that the 2019 queens were all African American. And I think that was something very powerful for pageantry cause it kind of unified a community. But I also think that in unifying, it also broke apart the other

people that weren't part of that African American community. So I can't say that it was a good or bad thing, it's just kind of the pick of the pick, that's what you get.

(Rita, 27, Hispanic, Accountant)

Rita's response stems from her own experience competing at the Miss USA pageant in 2019, the same year Black women won Miss USA, Miss Teen USA, and Miss Universe. Again, it is clear in these responses from study participants that Black women competing and winning is heavily overlooked, criticized, and claims are made to suggest false images of Black women. Rita stated, without evidence, the pageant organization she competed in has a political agenda and that is why Black women won. Further, she argues that while this was a powerful moment in pageant history as it "unified" one group, she cannot say it is "good or bad" as it "broke apart" others who are not part of the Black community.

As a former Miss Texas USA, Abby discussed advising a friend who was competing in Miss Texas USA who felt like she was not winning because she is Black. Abby admitted that, at the time, the Miss Texas USA contestants and judging panel lacked racial and ethnic representation.

I remember having a conversation with Imani and we sat on my porch and she was like, "I feel like because I'm Black that I'm not winning." And I said, "I think there's something to that. There are no Black judges on our panel. I mean, maybe there was one, but we don't." There wasn't a whole lot of diversity on our judging panel competing at Miss Texas USA. And there wasn't a lot of African American girls, Black girls that would compete, as well. Imani was a big one that you sort of knew because she was tall and statuesque, and she looked different and she was a

light skin Black girl. I hate to say that played a part, but I think it did. And I remember telling her, “You're going to have to change your dialect. You're going to have to make them forget that you're Black.” And I remember when she won [Miss Texas USA] and was going to compete at Miss USA, I was like, “Now, forget everything [I told you] and go be you. Now you're in a different arena, you can just be you because they're going to like that!” It was like you had to compete differently. Some girls had to compete differently to win Miss Texas USA and then completely revamp for Miss USA. Imani was definitely one of those. Hurts me to say that cause I didn't think it was fair, but that's just how it was. (Abby, 36, White, Marketing Director)

This response reinforces Eurocentric beauty standards and controlling images of Black women. Abby discussed how there was little to no racial and ethnic representation at the time she and Imani were competing. She also stated the same for the judging panel which may have resulted in the lack of Black women competing in the Miss Texas USA pageant. When referring to Imani's appearance, she states that she “looked different” from that of Black women describing her as tall, statuesque, and a “light skin Black girl.” This statement reinforces Eurocentric beauty standards and whiteness as she describes Imani's racial features that society deems as appealing.

Abby also encouraged Imani to “change [her] dialect” so the judging panel would “forget [she's] Black.” This statement suggests that in order for Imani to be successful in this pageant, she needs to not sound nor look like a Black woman. While Abby acknowledges it was not fair, she said this is just how it was at the state pageant and further stated that some contestants, like Imani, had to compete differently than their white counterparts. Imani would later become Miss

Texas USA. Once she got to Miss USA, the national pageant, Abby said she no longer needed to compete the way she did at Miss Texas USA. At the national pageant, Imani could compete just as she is, a Black woman and not adhere to the standards of competing at the state level. Within recent years, there has been greater racial representation at the national level at Miss USA, however, Texas still lags.

This last narrative comes from Jada, a city titleholder in the America circuit. Similar to Abby's response, Jada discussed dialect in this quote to the role race and ethnicity play in pageantry. While Abby suggested that Imani change her dialect, Jada argues that a contestant, regardless of race and ethnicity, must speak well given that the playing field is now "leveled". While she does acknowledge the history of pageantry rooted in racism, particularly in the Miss America Organization, Jada believes that race and ethnicity no longer play a role in who is chosen by a panel of judges now that Black women, in 2019, won each mainstream title in the same year. Jada explained:

Eurocentric standards have really dictated what beauty is to Americans, to people all over the world. So, I do think for a while that was something that played a factor, especially considering women of color used to be barred from the Miss America competition. I think, especially in 2019, the playing field has definitely leveled. We've even seen titleholders who were all African American this past year, Miss America, Miss USA, Miss Teen USA, and Miss Universe. I truly don't think that race makes an impact anymore. I think you have to just speak good no matter who you are, no matter what you look like. (Jada, 21, Black, College Student)

Jada said that while Eurocentric beauty standards have largely “dictated” society, the “playing field has definitely leveled”, after the crowning of the 2019 queens who were all Black in both mainstream pageant circuits. When interviewing her over the phone, Jada did not, however, appear to have an accent. Despite Jada identifying as Black, her response seems to overlook the controlling images, like other study participants’ narratives, that society continues to place on Black women in pageantry such as physical appearance and dialect. Given that Jada is a local city titleholder in the Miss America circuit where there is less emphasis on outward appearance compared to the Miss USA circuit, one would question if she would have the same response to a leveled playing field if she were to compete in the Miss USA system. Despite greater representation of Black women winning mainstream titles recently, it remains a question whether or not these same women of color had to alter their dialect and physical appearance when competing. If so, one would question if, in fact, the playing field is really leveled.

Black women are largely underrepresented in Texas pageantry compared to that of white and Hispanic women. This chapter explored the motives for why women compete in pageantry. White and Hispanic women conveyed personal goals for competing while Black women’s responses were more nuanced as they articulated individual goals, collective goals, or both individual and collective goals. Many also expressed the importance of racial representation and compete in hopes of encouraging Black women and other women of color to compete. This chapter also explored tokenism as many explained that this is an issue particularly at the Miss Texas USA pageant. Some Black participants say that based on trends from previous years, only one Black contestant will make it into the Top 5 at Miss Texas USA. A Black woman has not won the Miss Texas USA title since 2007. Thus, even when a Black contestant makes it into the

Top 5, the likelihood of her winning is low given the lack of racial representation among Texas state titleholders over the years. When Black women do win mainstream titles, some white participants argue this is due to their race rather than their accomplishments. The use of controlling images is used among some participants who grapple with Black women winning national and global titles. In their responses, they articulated how pageants are becoming more about race and less about who qualifies for the title. These women overlook the accomplishment of Black titleholders suggesting it is their race that contributed to them winning, not the qualities they possess as a contestant vying for the title.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE BIKINI LINE: EMBODIMENT OF MISS AMERICA & MISS USA STATE CONTESTANTS

Participants in this study conveyed the ways in which they prepared physically for a beauty pageant and use of cosmetic surgery. While participants in their respective pageant circuit (e.g., Miss Texas America and Miss Texas USA) shared preparing mentally and working with pageant coaches and interview coaches, this section on embodiment pays special attention to the physical preparations such as physical activity, diet regimes, and enhancements to physical appearance. This section examines the lengths that many participants went to not only preparing their bodies for a beauty pageant but also their consideration for medical intervention and for what reasons. Foucault asserted that bodily docility is achieved by the possibility that one is under surveillance at any given time (Foucault 1977). Social control is embedded within beauty norms and practices to subscribe to Western aesthetics. It is clearly apparent that study participants in this USA system expressed a greater commitment and drive to achieve a particular body type compared to the responses from women who competed in the America circuit.

Study participants convey a unique relationship with their bodies in adhering to specific beauty norms and expectations particularly among contestants competing in the USA circuit. While some feminists may regard cosmetic surgery as medical misogyny (Davis 1991), 34% or about 1 in 3 women in this study shared their decision to go under the knife whether it was for the purposes of pageantry or not. Beautification practices, like cosmetic surgery, are strategies for which individuals, primarily women, aim to achieve an ideal body image which often is unrealistic or unattainable (Bonell, Barlow, and Griffiths 2021). Chapkis (1986) argues that beauty is a central form of women's oppression and is reinforced in the cosmetic industry,

media, and other structures of domination such as racism, classism, and ageism. According to the American Board of Cosmetic Surgery (ABCS), the terms plastic surgery and cosmetic surgery are often used interchangeably. While both are closely related, they are, in fact, different in nature. The ABCS defines plastic surgery as surgical and is the reconstruction of facial and body defects. It is intended to correct and is reconstructive in nature. Cosmetic surgery, however, is elective and is intended to improve aesthetic appeal through different types of cosmetic surgery procedures such as breast augmentation, facial contouring (e.g., rhinoplasty), body contouring (e.g., liposuction), and skin rejuvenation (e.g., Botox, and filler treatments) (americanboardcosmeticsurgery.org). In the U.S. alone, about 92% of those who undergo cosmetic surgery are women (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery 2018). Cosmetic surgery has the capacity to reshape, restyle, and reconstruct bodies to meet prevailing fashions and cultural values (Davis 1995). Thus, these ideals and values are reinforced in Western beauty pageants.

Within the USA system, the competition places greater emphasis on Western aesthetics and ideal body standards. In fact, the judging criteria for the swimsuit competition in the Miss Texas USA pageant is 33% of a contestant's overall score (misstexasusa.com). For the Miss Texas America pageant, there is no swimsuit category but rather a talent category. Thus, less attention is paid to physical appearance. Contestants in the Miss America circuit were less likely to have an intensive workout and strict diet regimes. Instead, their preparation for Miss Texas America encompassed lengthy interview sessions with coaches and spending hours practicing their talent. Further, there was only one participant in this study from the Miss America circuit who indicated having had cosmetic surgery. Participants from the Miss Texas USA circuit

indicated preparing several months in advance to year-round by working out 5-7 days a week with a trainer and following a strict diet regime. Many Texas USA contestants are willing to go to these extremes because this is what is socially expected in the USA system where toned muscular thin bodies are viewed most desirable to win the state title and advance to the national pageant of Miss USA.

This chapter on embodiment is broken up into three sections outlining how women prepare for a beauty pageant competition. The first section, Body Managing Practices, examines physical activity and dietary regimes during the time in which participants were preparing for the state pageant. Participants, particularly in the USA circuit, shared extreme regimes they deployed to achieve a physique that is deemed most desirable for this pageant. Participants in this section also discussed the discipline and risky behaviors they introduced in the process as well as some experiencing body dysmorphia. There was a distinct difference between the ways in which participants from the USA system prepare physically versus the participants in the America circuit. Bozsik et al. (2018) posit the differences in the missions of Miss USA and Miss America competitions and in how the contestants are judged suggest that Miss USA winners may be more representative of these thin ideal images. The second section, Medical Intervention, examines the participants who elected to get cosmetic procedures. Many, particularly competing in the USA circuit, argue that the decision was for the purposes of personal interest while others solely decided to pursue these procedures strictly for the purpose of the pageant. Many women, however, indicated that someone convinced them (such as a pageant coach or pageant sponsor) to “tweak” an area of their face or body. This also contributed to participants’ decision to deploy cosmetic surgery, especially for the purposes of a pageant. The final section, Managing Racial

Embodiment, examines the experiences and realities of participants, namely Black women, who described negotiating embodiment practices. This included adhering to Eurocentric beauty standards or negotiating to embracing their natural appearance and features (e.g., hair style and texture). Black participants and one Asian-American participant explained grappling with the decisions to embrace their natural features and risk not being selected to win or deploy practices to achieve what is deemed most desirable in both pageant circuits in terms of physical appearance and features.

Body Management Practices

This section explores the strategies women deployed pertaining to physical activity and diet regimes. For decades, the promotion of body ideals has existed positing a sense of false reality of women's bodies. Since the 1950s, the average weight of women with an ideal body size (i.e., Playboy centerfolds and Pageant winners) decreased in comparison to women in the general population (Bozsik et al. 2018; Spitzer, Henderson, Zivian 1999). Individuals are socially conditioned to embody and embrace thin ideal bodies that are often unattainable. To this day, there is a significant discrepancy for most women between an average body size and the "ideal" body size (Bozsik et al. 2018; Dittmar 2008). Women in this study negotiate ways in which they attain a desirable body ideal that is reflective of their respective pageantry system. Women in the USA system aimed to achieve a toned, more muscular body shape while attaining a thin frame. Conversely, Miss Texas America contestants were more likely not to engage in such extreme physical fitness and strict dieting regimes given that the pageant system is viewed as more modest and pays less attention to bodily appearance in their scoring of contestants. Additionally,

as of 2018, the Miss America pageant and Miss Texas America pageant no longer include the swimsuit competition in its pageants. Participants uniquely negotiate the ways in which they prepared physically and diet, if at all, for the purpose of their respective pageant circuit.

Numerous studies have reported that the media, through films, pornography, and social media outlets, influences strict beauty standards and promotes weight concerns particularly among women (Bonell, Barlow, and Griffiths 2021; Placik and Arkins 2014). These same ideals are also perpetuated among pageant contestants, namely, in the USA circuit given the pageant's overall attention to physical aesthetics compared to the Miss America circuit. In their 2003 study on body image and self-esteem among 131 beauty pageant contestants nationwide, Thompson and Hammond (2003) found that 48.5% reported wanting to be thinner or actively trying to lose weight. Further, most women in the study reported developing an eating disorder at the same time or after they became involved in pageantry. In this current study, however, participants did not indicate having an eating disorder. Rather, they articulated having a unique relationship with food, with some experiencing body dysmorphia and self-doubt, feeling pressured to adhere to strict beauty standards, and one participant falling into a "deep depression" during her reign as Miss Texas America.

When asked how they prepare for a pageant, most Texas USA participants discussed the importance of physical fitness and dieting. They seek to embody what their respective pageant system deems as most desirable which looks quite different between the two systems. The following narratives from participants in each pageant circuit negotiate deploying varying degrees of physical and dietary regimes. In her interview, Brandy, a former Miss Houston USA,

shared having to juggle between her studies as a law student and achieving her physical fitness goals for the pageant. She stated:

Fitness is a huge part of pageant prep. That's one reason I really love pageants because it helps me stay on a fitness journey because I have a goal in mind. ... It was about being and feeling my best in a swimsuit on stage. Being my best because I started pageants a year before I started law school, but then I did the bulk of my competing while I was in law school. And so it was very hard to stay fit while I was studying hours a day. ... So, I would workout once a day, sometimes maybe five times a week or depending on where my starting point was and what my goal was that determined how I would train. ... Also doing a lot of mental work because my biggest feat was getting past my own insecurities and my own negative self-talk. (Brandy, 27, Black, Lawyer)

Brandy discussed how she not only prepared physically but mentally, as well, for the USA state pageant she competed in. Negative self-talk was an issue that some participants discussed navigating through.

For Sonia, a former Miss Houston USA, she started preparing months in advance. This was a common theme among USA contestants that they would begin preparing months, if not a year, in advance for a pageant competition. She shared:

I would start months out, months in advance, changing up my diet plan. I try to eat healthy year around, but I'm on a very strict diet of vegetables and healthy protein primarily. I did that for my fitness and I worked out with my personal trainer weekly. (Sonia, 26, Hispanic, Business Owner)

Women in this study shared how they would work out several days a week and deploy a strict diet to achieve their bodily goals. These goals contribute to embodiment of what is expected at Miss Texas USA in order to be competitive and win. For Sonia, training weekly and eating a strict diet was a way for her to work towards embodying a desirable look for Miss Texas USA that required a toned, muscular, thin ideal body.

Kandi, a former Miss San Antonio Teen USA, also recalled preparing months in advance, so much so, before she even entered the pageant competition.

I remember preparing months before the pageant, a good five, six months. Before I even knew I was going to compete, before I signed up, I would start preparing. I wanted to do my best and get in the habit of doing instead of waiting till the last minute. When I won Miss San Antonio Teen, I got a free entry into Miss Texas Teen USA. I was awarded a fitness coach. She taught me how to eat right and how to work out and that was instilled in me. So, going forward, I just made sure that I did things the healthy way. (Kandi, 32, Black, Senior Onboard Specialist)

As a local city titleholder, Kandi was awarded a fitness coach (e.g., fitness sponsor). She stated that working with a fitness coach instilled in her how to deploy healthy fitness and dietary habits to which she practiced even after her reign. Some participants echoed this same response about how preparing for a pageant led them to leading a healthy lifestyle overall.

Continuing with the trend of extreme fitness and dieting, Porsha reflects on her experience as Miss Kemah USA and being told that she is an investment in this business. She shared:

I attribute my Miss Texas USA body to extremely strict dieting, working out, and just genetics. I typically worked out four days a week. I would get off of a 12-hour shift and go to the gym and workout for an hour. No dairy or carbohydrates. ... My pageant director is amazing. She is very, very supportive, but at the same time, they let you know that this is a business and you are an investment of theirs and you need to be your tiptop shape because at the end you were still considered an investment. They're not putting their money into you just for fun. So, no pressure! They said, "I'm gonna need you to be in the best shape you've ever been in in your life." (Porsha, 27, Black, Registered Nurse)

Porsha sheds light on a completely different aspect of embodiment. While she was engaging in strict dieting and workout regimes, it was made clear to her as a local city titleholder that she is an "investment to the business" and that she needed to be in the "best shape" she has even been in in her life. Based on her response, Porsha was seen both a representative of her city and a commodity as she prepared for the Miss Texas USA pageant. She was awarded sponsors and additional resources to help her prepare for the state pageant. Thus, she was expected to adhere to expectations of her pageant director and sponsors because she was told she was an investment. Given the prevalence of feeling pressure to uphold an unrealistic body image, titleholders may be less inclined to discuss or even share with their director and others about how they are grappling mentally to achieve such beauty standards.

Gloria revealed her struggle meeting bodily expectations of a titleholder as she described being looked at "under a microscope" as Miss Latina Houston (a pageant system entirely separate from the Miss America and Miss USA systems). She explained:

I'm a little rebellious and if I crave sugar, I don't believe in not eating a cookie. So, under the table I would eat whatever I wanted. Of course, I would work out and I would try to balance it, but I really didn't give myself such a strict diet. That's not my way of life. I don't believe in that. Just all of that prep, all of that practice all these months and days up to those pageants. ... For a while when I was Miss Houston Latina, I think I would closet eat just a little bit because I was under a microscope. I think that time was probably the time that I did have more risky behaviors towards food. I wouldn't eat in front of pageant officials or eat at all where people could see me. Then whenever nobody's looking, stuff was going in my mouth. (Gloria, 22, Hispanic, Student)

Having competed in a local city pageant in the USA system and competing and winning Miss Houston Latina, Gloria did not believe in strict dieting and other disciplinary practices. In fact, she admits to “closet eating.” From the experiences of Porsha, Gloria, and many others, women's bodies are regulated by those affiliated with the pageant circuits (e.g., sponsors, pageant directors, etc.). Participants expressed adhering to a certain ideal body image that is unrealistic. These disciplinary practices, such as extreme dieting and fitness regimes, are often necessary to remake the female body into an ideal body (Banet-Weiser 1999). Through these practices, Banet-Weiser argues, are the product of production to reproduce ideal femininity.

The following two participants reflected on their experiences that vary from other's when explaining their fitness goals and negotiating weight loss. Natalia discussed having lost seventy pounds for the competition she was preparing for. She stated:

The biggest issue for me has been my physical appearance because I don't size up compared to the other girls. ... When I competed with you, I got a nutritionist and a coach and lost all the weight. I had lost 70 pounds for that pageant and was still a size six, eight, like still! For me, it was a test. I wanted to show up the very best I could be, my personal best. But still, I didn't place. But that, in itself, was a huge achievement for me. ... I was so happy! I competed my last year at 26 and I was a size 12, 14. So, I was full-sized, the size that I am now and I rocked it! I had never had that much confidence on stage. I knew that I did very well and it wasn't about taking home the title. It was about proving to myself that I still got it! (Natalia, 29, Hispanic, Regional Account Manager)

Natalia's weight loss journey was quite personal as she acknowledged that she did not "size up" to the other constants with whom she was competing. These contestants she refers to may have mirrored an ideal image that is deemed most desirable in pageants within the USA circuit. Despite this, she expressed how happy she felt on stage. Further, she stated that while she did not win the title, competing in a USA circuit pageant as a "full-sized" contestant was an achievement overall for her. She acknowledged that she does not fit the mold of what is deemed a desirable body image in the USA circuit.

Louise also described her weight loss journey as she entered her first pageant. She stated: I was heavy in high school and I was still heavy a little bit when I competed in my first pageant, but by that time I had lost a few pounds and gained a little more confidence. So, I felt like I could confidently walk on stage. After that first pageant, I decided I'm going to continue with the fitness regimen. I started going

to the gym at least five or six days a week and I would stay from an hour to two and a half hours just on the treadmill or lifting weights and trying to tone up. That was extremely helpful because I learned what a healthy diet regimen was verses an unhealth diet regimen. I started counting my calories and ate 1200 calories or maybe a little bit more every day trying to lose weight. (Louise, 25, White, Unemployed)

Louise, who competed at both Miss Texas America and Miss Texas USA, described taking more extreme measures for weight loss that was consistent with other participants' by working out nearly every day for an extended amount of time. In the U.S., 69.5% of the population is either overweight or obese (Swift et al. 2018). Further, the optimal strategy for weight loss is physical activity and dietary caloric restriction. Given the high rate of this population, this reinforces how unrealistic expectations of an ideal body image. For Natalia and Louise, however, competing in pageantry encouraged these women to negotiate weight loss and diet. For Natalia, this meant seeking a nutritionist and accepting her body for what it looks like. For Louise, this meant extreme physical activity, exercise training, and dieting. Both women deployed varying body management strategies while achieving similar weight loss goals.

For Ebony, who competed in the Miss America circuit, she described completely different approaches to dieting and preparing for the state pageant.

I don't like the idea of dieting. I work in health and have a degree in Public Health, so I try to practice what I preach. I think of it as a lifestyle change or lifestyle adjustments especially once it gets closer to pageant week. So, a couple of things that I do is drink detox waters and water with fruit. That's one thing that

I do progressively as it gets closer and closer to pageant week. And that's for a couple of reasons. One is it helps with clearing up my skin. It makes me glowy and all those things. Two, I'm a dancer so I need to make sure that my body is able to actually move come talent time. I increase my yoga throughout my preparation. It allows me to incorporate more mindfulness techniques and really kind of get in tune with who I am and what it is that I want to present when I get in front of the judges. No fast food, no fried food if I'm cooking at home. I reserve my Whataburger and pizza for the weekends and do so sparingly. But that's my idea of a diet, so to speak. So not wanting to completely eliminate how I live but just making it better. What I didn't want was to show up pageant week as somebody who I am not 365 days a year. That was very important to me that the person who I showed up as on stage in my swimsuit was the same girl that you were going to see all year round. (Ebony, 25, Black, Health Promotions Specialist)

Given her profession and training in Public Health, Ebony argued that preparing for pageants is more like a lifestyle change or adjustment indicating that she did not believe in the idea of dieting. Rather, her drive encompassed showing up on stage as she would all year round by not completely eliminating how she lives and the kind of food she consumes but making improvements to her overall lifestyle. This stood out because the women in this study, especially those in the USA circuit, prepared months in advance leading up to the pageant. This also meant extreme physical activity and strict dieting. For Ebony, however, she took less of a restrictive approach to exercise training and dietary consumption by reserving certain foods sparingly. She

may have prepared this way because of her educational background and because of the limited emphasis the Miss America circuit has on bodily appearance and expectation, evidenced by eliminating the swimsuit category of competition.

For Claire, a former Miss Texas USA, preparing for a pageant was a lifestyle for her. Even now, after competing in pageants, she articulated how she continues to carry the “legacy” of being a Miss Texas USA and the lifestyle she deployed as she prepared. She stated:

Wow, there's so much that goes into preparing. Even now, after competing in pageants, I still live my life the exact same because I feel like as Miss Texas USA, that's something that I don't take lightly. And I think that if you are working towards being a Miss Texas USA, you have to be ready to always carry on that legacy and lifestyle. What I mean is, by just living a life at a higher standard of always being kind and servant-hearted and making good choices because once a Miss Texas, you're always a Miss Texas. I take that responsibility very seriously. For me, it was a 365 day a year, I always kept my body ready to go. I would just need like two weeks to clean up my diet a little bit more. But I wasn't one of those people that fluctuated with my diet and nutrition, it was always very consistent.

(Claire, 25, White, Realtor)

Claire is one of many participants who described preparing for a pageant as a lifestyle. For her, her motto when it comes to lifestyle in terms of embodiment, she says “Once a Miss Texas [USA], you’re always a Miss Texas [USA].” What this meant to her was continuing the lifestyle and legacy of Miss Texas USA by maintaining her body image 365 days a year even beyond pageants. This motivation may stem from the expectations by her state directors and pressure to

maintain a bodily image that is toned, muscular, and thin. In this space, she and many others deployed disciplined routines committing to being fit that is translated from the current standards of the feminine ideal (Banet-Weiser 1999). Through her disciplined lifestyle, Claire continues this commitment reinforcing what she says about always being a Miss Texas USA. Banet-Weiser (1999) argues that the female body is fixed in age and the embodiment of heterosexual desire. Pageants are not just about femininity, there is overt and covert attention paid to the attractiveness of contestants through the male gaze (King-O'Riain 2006). Thus, Claire and others may continue to adhere to this expected attractiveness going beyond just pageantry and through one's lifetime.

Along with the pressure to adhere to aesthetic appeal, a former Miss Texas America and reigning USA state titleholder expressed grappling with weight gain and managing her mental health during her reign. Savannah stated:

When I got into pageants, I didn't ever have to do anything too restrictive, but going into my third year competing in Texas, the online bullying hit so hard, I started spiraling. Looking back now, I think I went through a level of depression for the next three years after that, like I spiraled in this very dark place. I was about 125 pounds. And over the next two years, my weight jumped up to about 155. If you look at my Miss America pictures, I was probably 135 on that stage as Miss Texas [America]. So, my third year competing at Miss Texas America, I was like 125. Then all this backlash, the depression hit. The following year competing, I was probably running 132 and I won Miss Texas. Then preparing for Miss America, the whole backlash, "If she lost weight, she would be competitive. If she

loses two pounds per week, then she'll be competitive.” I never did anything like throwing up, but it was more or less trying to restrict so much that my body would rebound in the opposite direction. So then going to Miss America, I was probably 135 pounds. People were saying really mean things about my physique. It was such a dark time in my life just...a very dark place. After competing at Miss America, my weight kept climbing and climbing. I tried to restrict, but the highest weight was 155. As Miss Texas, I felt like I was in somebody else's body. They were dressing me, so I felt like I was in somebody else's clothes. It wasn't who I was. I just felt like I was wearing a mask. (Savannah, 28, White, Sales Representative)

Savannah explained experiencing a “dark place” during the time in which she was preparing for and after she won the title of Miss Texas America. Having encountered backlash online for her physique, she shared how her body weight fluctuated as she was trying to restrict herself to attain an unattainable body image. Research has posited that physical attractiveness may be a risk factor for disordered eating (Davis, Claridge, and Fox 2000; Thompson and Hammond 2003). As a titleholder in the America circuit, Savannah encountered criticism online for gaining weight. As she prepared for Miss America, this resulted in what maybe extreme dieting despite due to the pressures of being Miss Texas and getting to a desirable weight.

Bodily practices varied among participants as they aimed to achieve an ideal image. For Marisol, she deployed a controversial method in order to achieve a look that is deemed most desirable in the USA system.

One year when I was preparing for a pageant, I had a friend who was a weightlifter and he would take steroids and it wasn't legal and he gave me some. He gave me this substance and it's actually supposed to be used in horses for horse breeders to make the muscles stick out and lean out the fat. It really just does everything to get your skin to stick against the muscle and get whatever fat layers between your skin and muscles washed out. I started taking that and it made me very shaky. I lost a lot of weight that year and it was definitely the fittest I had ever been. I felt so beautiful at the time, which is so ridiculous. I look back at pictures, my gosh, I was so thin! I don't know how I ever got that way. But even then, I probably thought I was way overweight. The body dysmorphia that can occur in pageantry is crazy. That was the year I kept winning "Best in Swimsuit" everywhere I competed. I wanted to keep that going, but I also knew that there was life beyond pageants and I still cared about my mental health a lot. And I just decided to stop that. So, I just went onto a healthy diet. It was extremely strict from then on. I think I placed one more time for "Best in Swimsuit" after that. So, it's easy for women to get pulled into a negative body dysmorphia or eating disorders spiral because you're rewarded for doing bad things like that. (Marisol, 33, Hispanic, Marketing Director)

Women in the USA circuit, like Marisol, are embodied symbols of what an ideal representative of the title should embody. Scholarship highlights the varied meanings attached to beauty queens as embodied symbols (Kind-O'Riain 2008). For Marisol, this meant deploying extremes practices, such as taking steroids, to achieve an ideal body in order to win Miss Texas USA.

During the stint in which she was taking this substance, she was continuously awarded “Best in Swimsuit.” Based on her response, Marisol experienced a fascination with beauty igniting body dysmorphic disorder (BDD). BDD is a disorder of self-perception and the impairing preoccupation with an absence or minimal flaw in appearance (Vanish 2016). BDD is the obsession of perfection. Marisol deployed illegal practices to achieve her bodily goals. During this time, she recalled feeling fit and feeling the most beautiful she’s ever felt before on stage. At the same time, this led her to experiencing BDD as she expressed feeling overweight despite having lost weight during this period. She acknowledged that she was being rewarded for this unhealthy practice after winning “Best in Swimsuit” a number of times.

Another common theme that emerged in these data is the scant deployment of body management practices among participants from the America circuit. The remaining quotes come from participants, in the Miss America circuit, introducing little to no physical fitness and dietary regimes. Talent, scholarship prizes, and the elimination of the swimsuit competition are now what set the Miss America Organization apart from the Miss USA organization. Constructions of beauty are uniquely displayed that reflect expectations of this circuit compared to the USA system. Collectively, participants deploy varying practices, that do not consist of extreme physical fitness and dieting regimes, promoting different bodily goals. The limited physical preparedness should not discount the intense discipline and focus they afford to the pageant, rather, it is a completely different approach to preparing given the differences of both pageant systems (e.g., talent competition, platform, long interview with the selection committee, etc.).

For Jada, she felt there was less pressure to adhere to such bodily norms in this space especially after the elimination of the swimsuit competition. She stated:

I was a cheerleader for my university, so I was already working out every single day. I was eating a little more healthy, but there was no strict diet in place either. With Miss America 2.0, I did not feel any particular pressure to look a certain way. ... I would say there's not an emphasis so much on bodily appearance as there is service and what you can contribute to society. Granted, many girls who do well are still prioritizing their health because it is important. You do need to be physically healthy to do the job of Miss Texas or Miss America. I think taking that component [the swimsuit competition] out definitely has encouraged me.

(Jada, 21, Black, Student)

While she kept her same routine and ate healthier, Jada did not introduce anything extreme as she prepared for her pageant. She does acknowledge, however, the importance for a Miss Texas or Miss America to be physically healthy to carry out their duties as titleholders. This could encompass not only physical fitness but mental health as well. Less attention is paid to physical appearance and more about stamina. There are other qualities that delegates must adhere to that go beyond just attractiveness especially in this new era of Miss America. For the talent and interview portion of the competition, “contestants constitute themselves as active, self-possessed, and, most of all, deeply embodied” (Banet-Weiser 1999:88). This contributes to the emphasis on talent, community service, and public speaking, all requisites for titleholders in the America system. For Jada and many others, they argue the importance of being healthy while placing great emphasis on what they can do for their communities as titleholders.

Raven did not introduce any fitness or dietary regimes as she maintained a normal routine leading up to her pageant.

I didn't personally because I'm normally a pretty fit person with dance in my background. And so I kind of just kept my normal routine and it turned out fine.

(Raven, 21, Black, Student)

Given that she displayed less bodily discipline for Miss Texas America, most participants preparing for Miss Texas USA deployed extreme physical fitness and diet regimes. As a local city titleholder in the America circuit, Raven indicated that she kept her “normal” routine as her background is in dance. The way in which she prepares for pageants may stem, more so, from the recent elimination of the swimsuit competition at Miss America. Preparing for her and many others who compete in this circuit may consist of spending more time on practicing the talent and interview categories of competition.

Like Raven, Holly also took a subtle approach to preparing physically for her pageant in the America circuit. She explained:

I usually just worked out, like once a week. But other than that, I've kept the same dietary needs and everything. (Holly, 20, White, Student)

Based on many of these narratives, bodies are less regulated in the America circuit, especially now after many structural changes. For Holly, she kept her diet the same and worked out once a week. Conversely, participants from the USA system prepared physically several months to a year in advance, dedicating between 4-6 days of working out per week. Banet-Weiser (1999) argued that the physique of each contestant must closely approximate the current feminine ideal in order to remain competitive. This is no longer the case especially now since contestants no longer feel pressure to adhere to a feminine body ideal. To be competitive no longer rests on bodily appearance as it does on other abilities of a titleholder.

Some participants in this section also convey how they already live an active style and not needing to adhere to such strict regimes. Brenda explained:

I've always led a really active lifestyle. I was a cross country runner, a soccer player, track and field for middle school and high school. And I started marathon running my freshman year of college. So I didn't feel the need or the pressure to change anything or to lose any more weight. ... I definitely didn't feel any sort of pressure to change the way that I ate or do calorie counting. (Brenda, 23, Asian, Law Student)

Another theme among these participants in the America circuit when it comes to body management practices is feeling less pressure to work towards an unrealistic body image. For Brenda, living an active lifestyle is important as she was involved in sports throughout her life. She felt that she did not need to lose weight and change her diet as she prepared for Miss Texas America. Thus, this may enable participants to focus on other areas of competition (e.g., talent) and less on striving to achieve in ideal body image.

Participants deployed varying body management practices as they prepared for their respective pageant. For those who were preparing for the Miss Texas USA pageant, most expressed deploying strict physical exercise practices and dietary restrictions months to one year in advance of the pageant. This may be due to the emphasis on bodily appearance and expectations (e.g., muscular, thin, and toned physique) in the USA circuit. Conversely, participants in the Miss America circuit deployed less restrictive practices as they prepared for the state pageant. Given that the Miss America Organization no longer has a swimsuit competition, participants expressed feeling less pressure to adhere to unrealistic bodily ideals associated with pageantry.

The next section on embodiment explores how participants negotiate the use of medical intervention (e.g., cosmetic surgery) for the purposes of a pageant.

Medical Intervention

This section explores the strategies women deploy to enhance their physical appearance using medical intervention. Among those who were interviewed, 32% (N=12) indicated getting cosmetic surgery including six non-Hispanic white, three Hispanic, and three Black women. All of whom, with the exception of one, competed in the USA circuit including one who competed in both pageant circuits. One participant had competed in an entirely different pageant system outside the Miss America and Miss USA circuits. There were no contestants solely from the America circuit who indicated having any medical intervention. Cosmetic surgeries ranged from minor procedures such as Botox and lip fillers to more invasive procedures such as liposuction and breast augmentation. Among the participants who had cosmetic surgery, some asserted that they were convinced to “tweak” their appearance for the purposes of the pageant by a pageant coach, sponsor, photographer, or makeup artist. Other participants suggested they did not get medical intervention(s) solely for the purposes of a pageant but rather for personal reasons.

Many titleholders in this study, both local city and state titleholders, reported having various sponsors as part of their prize package to help them prepare for the state or national pageants. Porsha, a former Miss Kemah USA, shared her experience achieving dental attractiveness through her dental sponsorship as part of her prize package.

I had gum contouring. ...If you smile and you see mostly your gums, what they do is they go in and cut some of the gum away so it exposes more of your actual

teeth which I thought was amazing! ... It was something that was suggested to me. [As Miss Kemah USA,] we have sponsors and each sponsor is in charge of a specific aspect of your appearance. You have a hair sponsor, makeup sponsor, wardrobe sponsor, you'll have a walking coach and interview coach. Somebody is in charge of or oversees every aspect of your appearance. We also had a dental sponsor. I received Invisalign and teeth whitening. And they went ahead and did gum contouring for me as well. Sponsors just suggest things and then you go, "Okay. I'll do that!" and you can get it done. (Porsha, 27, Black, Registered Nurse)

As she revealed in her interview, Porsha's dental sponsor suggested she get gum contouring because when she smiled, there was significant exposure of her gums. While she had not considered gum contouring before, she was open to this procedure that would positively alter her smile especially competing at the Miss Texas USA pageant. Research posits that "people with impaired dental appearance are highly likely to be perceived substantially differently from those having healthy-looking dentitions" (Ong, Brown, and Richmond 2006). As a titleholder, every aspect of Porsha's appearance is surveillanced including her smile. Pageant sponsors for titleholders are responsible for certain aspects of their appearance. Porsha conveyed how sponsors will suggest tweaking certain areas of the body. This is likely to occur during the process in which city titleholders are preparing for the state pageant. Her teeth were transformed after the modification of her gums, having Invisalign, and teeth whitening to adhere to the standards of what constitutes as a healthy-looking smile particularly for a local city titleholder and competing at the state pageant.

Sonia, a former Miss Houston USA, shared her experience having a beauty sponsor who specialized in different cosmetic surgeries. She indicated having minor procedures to enhance certain areas of her body. She stated:

[MILA] plastic surgery is my beauty sponsor [as Miss Houston USA]. But everything we've done has been facials. They have fat burning machines which helps tone up different parts of your body. So other than that, I've gotten some cellulite treatments and Ab toning treatments here and there over the years. But yeah, that's about it. Anything you can do that helps, but I don't think you should go to the extreme. (Sonia, 26, Hispanic, Business Owner)

Sonia received, from her beauty sponsor, different bodily treatments to enhance areas of her body, such as eliminating cellulite. Given that she won Miss Houston USA, if it fair to assume that she had a body type that was already desirable in this pageant, therefore, may not have had much cellulite to begin with. Thus, her sponsor may have suggested this procedure to her. Some scholars argue that cosmetic surgery may strengthen narrow cultural norms about female beauty...and transform the woman's bodily self-awareness as she may come to engage in a thorough self-surveillance of her body that can be far from liberating. (Davis 1995; Morgan 1991; Zeiler 2013). For Sonia, she may have surveillanced her body even more so after this experience with such treatments altering areas of her body that she might not have noticed before until meeting with her beauty sponsor. She did underscore, however, "anything you can do that helps" suggesting that she may be supportive of the idea of more invasive medical intervention.

Dominique, a former Mrs. Texas, shared her experience getting plastic surgery with a friend. She stated:

One year, it wasn't for pageants, but liposuction had just come out and a friend of mine was close friends with a cosmetic surgeon. And so, she's like, "You should get liposuction, let's do it together!" So, I got liposuction, so be it, it was just liposuction. ... I know a lot of girls that have plastic surgery and I say to them what I say to myself, "If you're doing it for a pageant, you're doing it for the wrong reasons. If you're doing it for yourself, then do it for yourself." I don't have a problem with plastic surgery or cosmetic surgery. ... I just feel like if you're only doing it for a pageant and then you end up not winning the pageant, what are you gonna do about that, cause it's not about that. (Dominique, 56, Black, Business Owner)

Dominique's experience was consistent with others' experiences with medical intervention. She shared that it was a friend of hers who suggested getting liposuction. Like many others in this study, Dominique may not have thought of getting this type of medical intervention until someone mentioned it to her. This is consistent with the experiences of other participants as the idea is presented to them from someone else and not necessarily their original intention. Research posits that the body engages actively and meaningfully with its environment...and shapes cultural practices (Crossley 1995; Gattario et al. 2020; Merleau-Ponty 1962). For Dominique and other participants in this study, their environment, as pageant contestants and titleholders, is shaped by what constitutes as beautiful and an ideal body shape in this space while maintaining and achieving a look that is socially desirable.

For Marisol, she articulated having her breasts augmented for the purposes of a pageant and planned to continue such interventions had she won Miss Texas USA. She explained:

I had breast implants. That was my reward for winning Miss Austin USA. The plan was that if I had gone on to win Miss Texas USA that year, I was going to get rhinoplasty for Miss USA. I didn't end up winning, so I didn't ever get rhinoplasty. But yes, I did get my implants for that purpose. I was told by several [pageant] coaches that my body was out of proportion, and this was a way for me to get back into proportion. And again, those were years that I was starting to win the “Best in Swimsuit” award at these pageants. (Marisol, 33, Hispanic, Marketing Director)

Marisol’s reasoning for deploying medical intervention reinforces the theme of participants in the USA circuit negotiating medical interventions. For Marisol, it was her pageant coaches who told her that her body was out of proportion. She internalized these statements made by those she trusted as they helped her prepare for her pageants which led her to being awarded “Best in Swimsuit” and ultimately winning a preliminary pageant. Thus, she believed that her body was not where it should or could be if she wants to win the state title. Marisol and others who have deployed medical interventions may encounter appearance comparisons to other contestants they are competing with to enhance or alter their appearance. This in return may hinder these women as they strive to adhere to ideal body images for the sole purpose of winning a pageant title.

Janelle, while negotiating less invasive procedures, was also informed by her pageant coach to consider enhancing her features for the purposes of a pageant competition.

I've never had anything invasive, but I have had a little Botox for my frown lines. And then I had natural fillers done in my lips. ... My [pageant] coach, she was like, “You're perfect, there are just a couple of things we can tweak.” We sat

down and talked about it and had many conversations. I was like, “okay, well, I don't feel like there's anything wrong with my body. I don't mind enhancing other features as long as they look natural and not overdone.” I think my coach made sure that I realized there's nothing wrong with my body, there's nothing wrong with my face, I'm fine. She always gave me the decision at the end of our consultations. She was like, “Is this something you want to do?” I was like, “Yeah, I don't mind especially after seeing some of the results.” So, we had to have an open line of communication instead of her just telling me, “You need to do this because this is messed up.” (Janelle, 27, Black, Lawyer)

Similar to other participants, Janelle was also convinced by her pageant coach to “tweak” her appearance, deciding to get Botox and lip augmentation despite being reminded that she looks “perfect.” Berkowitz (2017) argues that Botox is widely marketed as a quick, easy, safe, and reliable way to temporarily improve the look of moderate to severe frown lines. Both Botox and lip fillers were the two most common medical interventions among contestants in the USA circuit in this study. For Janelle, she wanted to ensure that such cosmetic interventions looked natural and not overdone as she was preparing for her pageant. This practice, in this highly competitive environment, reinforces that a contestant can be what is socially considered “perfect” and yet such “tweaks” to one’s appearance are still suggested by others.

Like Janelle, Veronica also deployed cosmetic intervention. After she won the title of Miss Central South Texas USA, a preliminary competition to the state pageant, she got lip augmentation.

I've never had any plastic surgery done. The only thing I had done was when I became Miss Central South Texas [USA], I had a little bit of lip filler. It was pretty minimal. I've never had anything else done. People have said, "Oh, you can get your boobs done, you can get your nose done." I've heard that. ... To compete in Texas, a Texas beauty pageant, there are certain things people say, "Your hair has to be big. Your boobs have to be big." And it was cool for me to be like, "I don't have big boobs, I just worked with what I had." I'm 5'11 and a half. So, it was just really cool to be myself and be the first runner-up at Miss Texas USA without having to get all this stuff done, literally by just being myself. (Veronica, 28, Hispanic, Sports Reporter)

From Veronica's experience, she embraced what she had despite what others' around her said she should alter. After winning the pageant, she stated that she got "lip fillers." She does not indicate whether or not she was convinced to get the procedure done by those around her such as a sponsor, but says it was "pretty minimal." Given that after she won the local city title and began preparing for the state pageant, Veronica may have been convinced or awarded a sponsor who was responsible for her appearance, therefore, may have suggested cosmetic intervention such as enhancing the size of her lips or bust.

When asked about her experience involving medical intervention, Savannah, a former Miss Texas America and reigning state titleholder in the USA system, shared how people online posted comments about her physique. She was the only participant to have experience competing in the America circuit who deployed medical intervention.

People were saying [online] that I looked like I had breast implants, which I had not, I had a breast reduction. They said really mean things about my physique. ... I have had Botox on my forehead and between my eyebrows. And then I've had a little bit of filler on my cheekbones. (Savannah, 28, White, Sales Representative)

While Savannah did not indicate being convinced by a sponsor or pageant coach to enhance her appearance, Savannah did discuss different procedures she had deployed during the time she was competing. From her experience, beauty standards were enforced and perpetuated by people commenting online about her body assuming she had her breasts augmented. She may have felt pressure to uphold an ideal body image that is viewed as favorable in each pageant circuit. For example, based on her interview, she indicated having a breast reduction around the time she was Miss Texas America. Given that this pageant is more modest in nature, this may have been a contributing factor to get a reduction. The Miss USA circuit is viewed as sultry, therefore, she may have deployed cosmetic intervention (e.g., Botox and fillers) as she was preparing for the Miss USA pageant, given the trend of this procedure among other USA contestants in this study.

Another state titleholder, a former Miss Texas USA, shared her experience deploying medical intervention. Claire stated:

I'm all about self-confidence and if there's something that you want to do to make yourself feel better, I'm all for that. Personally, I've never done something specifically for pageants. But I had a breast augmentation because I wanted one. I'd been saving for one since I was nine years old. So, I wanted that for myself. Did it help me win Miss Texas USA? Maybe, maybe not. I have no idea, but that wasn't my reason. It was just because I wanted it, personally. And then I've had

my lips done and that was for pageantry. I had this makeup artist, who I really admired in the business, tell me, “Oh, you could really use some filler in your top lip.” So, I did it once and then I hated it. So, I never did it again. (Claire, 25, White, Realtor)

While Claire did not get her breasts augmented for the purposes of a pageant, she was persuaded by a makeup artist to enhance her lips. Research argues that people with a more beautiful and dependable appearance have more acceptance in society, therefore, appear more energized and confident in individual and social activities (Jones and Kramer 2016; Khademi et al. 2021). Claire considered medical intervention at a very early age to possibly improve her confidence. This decision to enhance her bust line may have benefited her in pageantry and ultimately winning the Miss Texas USA pageant. She acknowledged that this procedure may have or may not have helped her win the state title. Claire is one of four former state titleholders to have breast augmentation (including a breast reduction). Given the success in pageantry among these four women, all of whom from the same pageant circuit, the Miss USA system appears to desire a particulate bust size.

Abby, a former Miss Texas USA, grappled with whether or not she would have benefited from having her breasts augmented before she competed at the Miss USA pageant. She stated:

No, I never did. I always thought maybe if I had my breasts done, that would have helped me [win Miss USA]. But no, I didn't get mine done until after I had my kids. (Abby, 36, White, Marketing and Communications Director)

While she made the Top 10 at Miss USA, Abby did not indicate having any cosmetic surgery. During her interview, she reflected back during that time pondering if she did have her bust size

enhanced, whether that would have helped her win the national pageant. She asserted that she did decide to augment her breasts after she had children.

Rita, a former USA state titleholder outside of Texas, had breast augmentation. She stated:

My boobs. It was kind of like a double whammy. I always had small boobs, but my mom was like, “Well, I mean, might as well get it done, kill two birds with one stone.” (Rita, 27, Hispanic, Accountant)

Rita shared that she had always had smaller breasts. It was her mother that mentioned to her about enhancing the size of her bust. It is understood that Rita had gotten this procedure done prior to winning the state she was representing at Miss USA. Thus, this was not performed by a pageant sponsor. The quotes from Abby and Rita are uniquely similar in that Abby reflects on whether she would have benefited from breast augmentation. Rita, on the other hand, did get her breast enhanced and went on to win the state title. While both women were state titleholders and performed exceptionally well at the Miss USA pageant, Rita was in the Top 5 while Abby was in the Top 10 at the national pageant during each of their respective years. If their decisions were reversed, their placements might have varied based on their responses, particularly Abby’s.

This section explored participants’ medical interventions of beauty. Of the participants in this section, all but one competed in the USA circuit. One participant won the state title in both pageant circuits, and one was a state titleholder in an entirely different pageant circuit outside the mainstream pageant systems. Some argued that pageantry had no influence on their decision to get plastic or cosmetic surgery while others deployed such medical interventions for the sole purpose of a pageant. Such interventions included both plastic and cosmetic surgeries (e.g.,

breast augmentation, Botox, lip augmentation, etc.) among participants from varying racial and ethnic backgrounds. Both Botox and lip augmentation (e.g., lip “fillers) were the primary interventions women deployed.

Another emerging theme in these data suggest that participants who have had a medical intervention were convinced to “tweak” an aspect of their features or body by someone they knew in the pageant realm such as a pageant coach or sponsor. Many local city and state titleholders are awarded sponsors that are responsible for a certain aspect of their appearance. Some indicated that their sponsor from the pageant had persuaded them to consider enhancing their appearance. Based on their response, some did not consider the procedure(s) before until someone convinced them otherwise. This may reinforce women’s desire to uphold an ideal body image that the Miss USA circuit, in particular, deems as most desirable. Interestingly, all four state titleholders from the USA circuit in this section have had a surgical procedure on their breasts including a breast reduction. Two even questioned whether or not having the procedure would have changed the outcome of their performance at the Miss Texas USA or Miss USA pageants. Another state titleholder did not question whether or not her decision to have her breasts augmented had an impact on her performance, she was, however, the first runner-up at the Miss USA pageant. From these narratives, overall, those who enhance their appearance through medical interventions may have an advantage over those contestants that do not, particularly in the Miss USA circuit. The next section examines the relationship between race and embodiment and how this is linked to lived experiences of women of color in Texas pageantry.

Managing Racial Embodiment

This section on managing racial embodiment explores the role of whiteness in minority women's experiences preparing for pageantry. Research has posited that whiteness serves as an organizing principle that conditions normative ways of being in and understanding society that are fundamentally predicated upon the raced body as social signifier (hooks 1990; Omi and Winant 1994; Seawright 2018). A common theme in these data on racial embodiment shows that race is inscribed. As minority participants (e.g., Black women) prepared for a pageant competition, some conveyed having to negotiate between possessing certain qualities and characteristics of themselves in order to embody whiteness. Azzarito and colleagues (2017) reported that often times whiteness functions to define the "Other" as "different," "lacking something," "deficient," or "exotic." In pageantry, those who are non-white (e.g., "Other") negotiate embodying an identity through ways in which they perform throughout the competition. Black participants explained having to train and undo certain aspects of their identity as they compete, often times, in front of a mostly white panel of judges.

For decades, white contestants and titleholders in U.S. mainstream pageants have been overrepresented. Thus, whiteness is a staple of Western beauty pageants. Until recently, greater representation of minority women winning at the local, state, national, and global levels show that more women of color are represented, but at what cost? The following quotes on racial embodiment detail how women of color (e.g., Black women) are uniquely positioned and navigating through their own identity in a space that embraces whiteness.

As Black participants negotiate managing racial embodiment, the racial nature of pageants places great significance on physical appearance (King-O'Riain 2006). Kiki reflects on her experiences having to training to undo her accent because she is Black. She explained:

I would not consider myself to having much of a Southern or country accent. I'm sure if I go somewhere else people would say I do. That was something, especially in interview [with the judges], that my coach and I really worked on was enunciation. If there were any words that kind of came across as Southern, getting rid of those, because people would look at me and kind of classify me as ghetto or uneducated for speaking that way. But you look at a lot of other girls from other races who speak with their Southern twang and they're looked at as Southern Belles. For me, I never really understood why if we spoke the same, we come from the same place, then why someone else of a different race would be looked at as endearing, a Southern Belle. And for me, it would be looked upon as being uneducated or ghetto. ... I would definitely say as far as prepping, there were certain things that I would have to tweak that I was encouraged not to do because it would be looked upon as, like I said, uneducated, aggressive, attitudinal but if other races do it, it's looked at as powerful, strong, et cetera. (Kiki, 29, Black, Registered Nurse)

This response is powerful as Kiki describes having to undo her accent just so that she would not be viewed as “uneducated,” “ghetto,” or “aggressive.” A duality in enunciation exists between white and Black women. Kiki explained that a Black woman with a southern accent is viewed negatively compared to a white woman with the same accent. White women, from her

experience, are viewed as a “Southern Belle” and “endearing.” Conversely, Black women, who come from the same city or state and have the same accent are viewed as “uneducated” and “ghetto” because of the color of their skin. Further, Kiki was convinced by her pageant coach to tweak her accent so that the judges would not stereotype her. Given that race is socially constructed, race is a central vessel of group affiliation and life in the modern world (Bonilla-Silva 1999). For Black women in pageantry, like Kiki, their identity and racial embodiment may have to be sacrificed in a space that embraces whiteness.

Brenda, who identifies as Asian-American, grappled with her features that reflect her identity. She explained:

When I was younger, when I wasn't so strong in loving who I was and being comfortable in my own skin, I definitely considered getting more white and Eurocentric features because as a Filipino, I have a very flat button nose. ... But for me personally, I had a phase in my life where I thought I wasn't beautiful and I didn't feel comfortable. But going through competing last year [at Miss Texas America] and just being more confident in who I am, I don't feel that that's a need anymore. (Brenda, 23, Asian-American, Law Student)

For Brenda, a former Miss Dallas America, it was pageantry that helped her embrace her Filipino identity and become confident with who she is. The nuance of women of color in this study represents varied lived experiences as participants struggle with their racial and ethnic identity in this space that dictates what is deemed physically attractive. For Brenda, she sought affirmation in her experience competing at Miss Texas America where she gained self-confidence without

modify her features or attributes. Brenda's experience does not translate to the experiences of Black women.

Dominique shared how she felt validated after the 2019 titleholders, all Black women won at the nation and international levels. She stated:

I've heard Black girls say to me, "I don't enter pageants, because Black girls don't win." And I say to them, "If Black girls don't enter, Black girls don't win. You just have to do it. You just have to try it." ... As a Black mom, I think it's great that my Black daughters have seen a Black president and Black representation of Miss USA and Miss Universe 2019 who actually looked like them and looked like me. For instance, when Miss Universe won, representing South Africa, I connected to her more than any other titleholder because she looked like me. She's dark skinned and we both have shaved hair. So, seeing her win with her natural style, that validated to me, for the world, that Miss Universe still represents universe. (Dominique, 56, Black, Business Owner)

Dominique shared how she felt when Miss Universe won in 2019, saying that she connected more with her because of their similar features as both have dark skin and shaved hair. These same features have not been embraced in pageantry over the decades, especially in Western mainstream pageants. She stated that she felt validated after seeing Black representation at the national and global levels because it is the dominant white group that has had the power to define these features. Given the greater racial representation in pageantry and among titleholders in recent years, Dominique asserted that in order for young Black women to win, they must compete. If they do not enter, they will not win.

Many Black participants discussed their perceptions of hair texture for the purposes of a pageant. Research argues that whiteness is enacted and becomes oppressive when it directs, disciplines and controls behavior, culturally inscribing and normalizing bodies to white ideals and norms (Leonardo 2004). For Black women in pageantry, many explained having to negotiate altering their appearance and features that are Eurocentric in nature, such as hair texture, because this is what is desired in Western beauty pageants. Kandi explained:

I remember growing up, or competing in pageants, and thinking, “I have to have a long weave.” Now, you see women wearing their natural hair. That's beautiful and they're winning the crown! It's nice to see that representation for younger women and girls that are going through it. They may not want to compete in pageants, but they see a girl in a crown and sash that was selected to win and they can see their hair texture or the color of their skin and think that they are beautiful because growing up, society didn't always say that they were. (Kandi, 32, Black, Senior Onboard Specialist)

Kandi reflects on having to grapple with how she was going to style her hair when she was competing and thinking she needed to have long hair. Beauty ideals that embrace whiteness dictate how Black women negotiate preparing their bodies and identity for acceptance (Azzarito, Simon, and Marttinen 2017). She may have felt pressure to adhere to certain Eurocentric features by competing with longer hair, as opposed to her natural hair, for acceptance. She passionately stated that society has not been accepting of Black women's identities, therefore, young Black women feel encouraged and included when they see a Black woman similar features they can relate to with a crown and sash.

There is nuance embedded in the experiences of Black women as they negotiate racial embodiment. While Americans are socialized to subscribed to Western aesthetics, appearance stigmas have been assigned to groups based on race and gender (Orey and Zhang 2019). Some Black participants articulated having to undo certain aspects of their identity for acceptance while others have embraced their racial features. Ebony conveyed this nuance in her response stating:

There has been a shift from Black women relaxing their hair and straightening their hair to wearing their natural hair. Years ago, women did not want to wear their natural hair because it was not accepted. It was determined as unkempt or unprofessional. So, we have switched to being accepting of our natural hair. I've watched this happen over the last couple of years, being accepted, accepting of women who are dark skinned. For a long time, dark skinned women were not "pretty." You were pretty if you were light-skinned with straight hair in the Black community. Now there's a shift to accepting that your Black is beautiful. And while it feels good and encouraging, my fear is that it's just for a period of time that Black women are trendy. And then once the trend is over, we won't be trendy anymore. That's a fear that I have. And because that fear exists, it also is a fear that exists in pageantry that Black titleholders are a trend, that we're cool for now. I also question the validity of organizations' crowning titleholders of color, whether or not it's sincere or whether or not they're trying to fit in with the trend. (Ebony, 25, Black, Health Promotions Specialist)

Ebony fears that this moment of Black representation among titleholders in pageantry is just a trend like perceptions of hair texture and skin tone. She stated that Black women are viewed as trendy, for now, and fears that Black representation, especially among titleholders, will not last. This could result in young Black women not competing and further perpetuating whiteness and ideal beauty standards in Western beauty pageants. Further, she questions the “validity” of pageant systems crowning Black women to remain relevant in society.

The theme of negotiating hair texture persists as Janelle explained that she was hesitant to wear her hair natural. She stated:

A lot of us dye our hair blonde, get blonde highlights, or get extensions to make us look less Black and are hesitant to even wear our hair natural. ... There are things we definitely have to sacrifice for ourselves. We have to act one way with our family and then acting another way when we're on stage. Like, I had to be two people. ... Being African American, we have a whole other layer of competition. When I think of white privilege in pageantry, I just think of white girls showing up and not realizing that she's just basically competing against herself and that she can walk in there and it doesn't matter what she has on, she could still win. Not having to think about her minority counterparts and how we're really having to overcome so much. And the thought that they don't realize that it's unfair, or that they don't recognize that not more than one Black woman is making it into Top 5 is a problem. I think not recognizing that or just being willfully blind to it, it just perpetuates the issue. (Janelle, 27, Black, Lawyer)

Janelle expressed how Black women navigate through looking “less Black” as they prepare for Miss Texas USA. For her, Janelle says that Black women have to sacrifice certain aspects of their identity in order to look less Black when competing and to advance into the Top 5. She also mentions the lack of consciousness among white contestants about these barriers faced by Black women. White women are privileged in this space as they do not face racial barriers to appear more Eurocentric and undo certain aspects of their identity. Because white ideals are embraced in this pageant system and white women are overrepresented, Black women continue to face racial barriers and inequalities that are overlooked by the dominant group.

Like Janelle and other Black participants, Raven’s response continues the theme of expressing a collective consciousness pertaining to the management of racial embodiment. She explained:

I think with being a white contestant, it's kind of like in everyday life. You don't have to second guess things or think about different things. For me, what I thought about in this pageant is how I wanted to wear my hair. If I wanted to straighten it, or if I wanted to wear it naturally like a big fro. I ultimately decided to wear it natural because I was inspired by Cheslie, Miss USA 2019. And I wanted to make sure that if I won, that other Black girls were able to see that representation. You can straighten your hair if you want to but it's not a requirement for you. So, I think certain decisions like that, white contestants don't necessarily have to think about. (Raven, 21, Black, Student)

For Raven, she conveyed how white contestants do not have to grapple with altering their identity or physical features, such as hair texture, to appear more white presenting. Black

participants share a collective experience that the dominant group lacks consciousness for and may overlook barriers faced by Black women as this is not part of their reality. Raven says she chose to wear her hair naturally for the pageant because she was inspired by Miss USA 2019, who also wore her hair naturally and won. Raven had won her pageant after she wore her hair naturally and expressed that she hopes this, too, inspires other Black women.

For this final quote, Porsha described the pressure Black women face to “mute” themselves in order to be selected to win.

There’s pressure to feel like you have to mute who you truly are as a person in order to be picked or to win a pageant. You feel like you have to conform to almost like a Pageant Patty type of image especially if you are a different ethnicity. For example, if you're an African American female and you're competing in a pageant, it's not as well receptive to wear your natural hair as it is to wear relaxed hair or have extensions or even have a wig on. You get different reactions... In pageantry, you can't just be good. You have to be the best of the best especially when you are a minority. (Porsha, 27, Black, Registered Nurse)

Black women share common experiences of being Black and being a woman in a society that denigrates women of African descent (Collins 1990; 2000). In pageantry, Black women are expected to shed a piece of their identity or aspect of themselves in order to be competitive. For Porsha and other Black participants in this study, they share having to be the “best of the best” when competing in pageantry and in an environment that is not entirely accepting of their identity. Porsha stated that Black women have to “mute” and conform to an identity that supports

whiteness. Thus, Black women must be willing to sacrifice certain aspects of their identity and be a strong competitor in order to be selected to win.

Black women in Texas pageantry are uniquely positioned as they manage racial embodiment. It is important to note that Hispanic women in this study did not indicate having to alter or undo certain aspects of their identity, such as their accent or hair texture, to adhere to expectations of whiteness and physical attractiveness. Conversely, Black women and one Asian-American woman, in this section, explained having to grapple with altering or training to undo certain qualities that shape who they are as minority women. Black women expressed questioning how to style their hair for a pageant that is reflective of European features (e.g., long hair) as opposed to wearing it naturally. They also explained the lack of awareness among white contestants not even having to question how they will style their hair and other features. Participants in this section face greater barriers and inequalities in pageantry given that this space privileges whiteness. Thus, participants feel pressured to uphold a physical attractiveness that embraces whiteness in order to be competitive and win a pageant title.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study analyzed narratives among beauty pageant contestants about their motives for competing, experiences, embodiment, and perceptions of race and racial inequalities in Texas beauty pageants. This study was inspired by the historic 2019 crownings of Miss America, Miss Teen USA, Miss USA, and Miss Universe, all of whom are Black women. Texas is ranked the most successful state in the nation with the most victories in the USA circuit including nine crownings. Of the nine Miss Texas USA titleholders to win Miss USA, one won the title of Miss Universe who was also the first Black woman, Chelsi Smith, crowned Miss Texas USA in 1995. In the history of the Miss America Organization, there have been three women from Texas to win the title of Miss America. Texas beauty pageants are largely representative of white women and lack racial representation. Geographically, Texas is quite complex as the population rate among Hispanics is expected to surpass that of whites in the coming years. Findings from this current study revealed significant patterns in participants' motives for competing, preparation for competitions, and perceptions of race within pageantry. Overall, participants expressed enthusiasm for the 2019 crownings. Black participants' motives to compete were often more focused on collective goals such as serving as role models for other Black girls. They expressed that racial representation is what inspired them to initially compete, therefore, stressed the importance of representation of women of color. Others conveyed that it was the lack of racial representation they saw growing up, watching pageants on television, that motivated them to one day compete. On the contrary, white and Hispanic participants' motives were more individualistic citing personal growth and development as their motives for competing. Hispanic participants' standpoints were largely similar to that of white participants. This may be due to the

high levels of representation of Hispanics competing and winning in Texas pageantry, namely, in this USA circuit. (It is important to note that among the Hispanic participants in this study, none indicated immigration status. Further, a requirement for entering either pageant circuit is being a citizen of the United States.) Findings also revealed that Black participants manage racial embodiment by training or undoing certain aspects of their identity. This includes one's accent and features such as negotiating hair textures and styles to meet dominant white aesthetics. Finally, differences were observed among contestant preparation based on the pageant circuit they compete in. For those who competed in the USA system, strict dieting and exercise were themes that emerged to prepare especially for the swimsuit competition. Participants in the America circuit were less likely to deploy such extreme practices because there is no longer a swimsuit category of competition. Thus, these data demonstrate the complexities and nuance between participants' standpoints, experiences, and motives.

The data demonstrated that women, particularly Black women, who compete in beauty pageants in Texas have varying experiences than that of non-Hispanic white and Hispanic women. This study focused on three sections, 1) The Desire to Compete in Pageantry, 2) Racialized Motives for Competing, and 3) Embodiment. In the first section, 30% of contestants' (N= 11) articulated being inspired to compete in pageants. They expressed this desire stems from watching others who have competed, such as family members, especially sisters, or friends, meeting Miss Texas (America or USA) titleholders, or growing up watching pageants on television and witnessing a monumental crowning. Conversely, 41% (N= 15) described being encouraged by friends, family members such as mothers, or by a pageant director and receiving a flyer in the mail or seeing an advertisement on social media. Hyper-individualist motives were

strongly pronounced among non-Hispanic white participants such as gaining self-confidence, building friendships, and winning the crown. Hispanic women are uniquely positioned, in Texas beauty pageants, as they are largely represented in participation and among titleholders than any other minority group. This may be due to the high population rate of Hispanics in Texas that is expected to exceed that of whites in the coming years. Therefore, Hispanics participants' standpoint may be largely similar to whites. While Black participants shared similar motives in terms of personal goals with their non-Hispanic white and Hispanic counterparts, their motives for competing were also collective goals indicating specific aspirations for women of color such as great representation in pageants, inspiring Black girls to compete, and embrace their identity in a space that desires Western beauty standards. The final section of this study examined embodiment through body management practices, medical intervention, and management racial embodiment. This section explored the ways in which participants negotiated through physical activity, diet regimes, and enhancements to physical appearance. Nearly 1 in 3 participants had introduced cosmetic surgery as they prepared for a pageant competition with Botox and lip augmentation as the most common procedures. Black women and one Asian-American discussed their experience management racial embodiment. They shared having to train or undo certain aspects of their identity to adhere to Western aesthetics for the purposes of a pageant. Many Black women recalled having to negotiate their hair style and texture for the purposing of a pageant. Many articulated being inspired to wear their hair naturally, just like the 2019 titleholders did at the national and global pageants, while others choose more Western styles.

The implications of this study suggest that given the scant representation of Black women in Texas beauty pageants, the desire to compete, lived experience, motives, and racial

embodiment among Black participants are profoundly different from non-Hispanic white and Hispanic contestants. What makes this research so significant is Black women's experience do not reflect that of the dominant groups due to racial barriers that continue to exist in a space that is white dominant and favors Western aesthetics. On the contrary, Hispanic participants' standpoints are largely similar to that of white participants in Texas pageantry. This may be due to the high proportion of Hispanic women competing, more so in the USA circuit. Black women were more likely stress the importance of representation in beauty pageants often arguing that if Black women do not compete, Black women will not win. These women also expressed that their participation in pageants as a contestant or titleholder may inspire and encourage other Black women to believe that they, too, can compete and win. The only Asian-American in this study also expressed this same sentiment as Black women articulating the importance of ethnically diverse representation and to serve as a role model for Asian girls.

This study contributes to the limited research on Western mainstream beauty pageants and the lack of racial and ethnic representation among contestants and titleholders in Texas. Despite Western beauty pageants once barring non-white women from competing (e.g., Miss America Organization) and embracing white dominant aesthetics, this study aimed to showcase the shifts in racial representation in pageantry and explore perceptions of race and racial inequalities since the success of the 2019 queens in mainstream beauty pageants. This research advances the literature on pageantry as the current study explored how race operations within the current system after the 2019 crownings and during the era of the Black Lives Matter movement. Additionally, this study pays special attention to both mainstream pageant circuits in Texas. Past research has largely focused on the Miss America circuit at the national level (Banet-Weiser

1999; Watson and Martin 2004; Roberts 2014). While most study participants showed enthusiasm for the Black women who won the 2019 national and international mainstream titles, lack of awareness and knowledge of racial barriers in pageants are heavily overlooked among many white participants who compete in Texas. Almost all participants, regardless of racial background, acknowledged that white women are overrepresented at the state pageants, especially in the Miss Texas USA circuit. Some white participants did express the need for diversity. However, some were unwilling to acknowledge racial inequalities, such as the lack of Black representation among titleholders, in pageantry. This research clearly shows how white contestants and titleholders are unaware of their privilege in pageantry and overlook the racial barriers Black contestants face. This research also revealed how some white women, including former state titleholders perceived Black titleholders. The use of controlling images to describe Black titleholders and overlooking their accomplishments were conveyed by former white state titleholders. While progress has been made to a degree, states like Texas, also known as the mecca of all beauty pageants, lags in terms of racial progress. Based on their narratives, many non-Hispanic white women lack the understanding of their privilege in this space and overlook or ignore the historical practice of favoring whiteness in pageantry. Further, their perceptions of race and racial inequalities in the current system mirrors a colorblind ideology. Colorblind ideology, Bonilla-Silva (2017) argues, is the persistence of ignoring racism by providing nonracial explanations for enduring racial inequalities. Black participants and titleholders expressed having to train or undo their identity to adhere to Western aesthetics and oppressive ideals such as negotiating hair styles and textures to appear white. Thus, these experiences among Black women do not translate to the experiences of white and Hispanic participants.

There were no white or Hispanic women in this study that expressed having to train or undo certain features of their racial identity (e.g., accent or hair texture).

Limitations existed within this study. Given that the data collection process began in February 2020, only one participant was interviewed face-to-face. The remaining interviews were conducted by phone due the COVID-19 global pandemic. (Due to scheduling conflicts, one participant provided her responses to the pre-interview survey and interview guide electronically using a Word document). Interviewing participants face-to-face would have allowed for additional rapport building and possibly more in-depth responses to the interview questions. Another limitation in this study was the limited access to a broader range of ethnically diverse women (e.g., Asian, Muslim, and Native American women). While this study included women from various racial and ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Black and Hispanic), only one participant identified as Asian American. Given the low rate of ethnically diverse women in Texas beauty pageants compared to other racial and ethnic backgrounds, this would have allowed for greater analysis on other barriers faced by these women in white dominant spaces.

It is evident that while mainstream pageants at the national and global levels have witnessed racial representation among its contestants and titleholders, Texas beauty pageants in both circuits continues to lag. Future research would continue to explore racial progress in Western beauty pageants but at what cost to Black titleholders? Given that the 2019 queens are all Black women, future research would explore at what cost, if any, do Black titleholders have to negotiate manage or undoing aspects of their identity or racial embodiment to adhere to Western aesthetics in mainstream pageant systems.

Continuing with exploring Western aesthetics, future research would also explore colorism in beauty pageants. In this current study, two participants discussed their own experience with colorism within beauty pageants that are exclusive to a particular racial or ethnic group. One Hispanic participant and one Black participant shared similar experiences competing in a pageant that was exclusive to their racial and ethnic background. They revealed that from their experience, contestants with lighter skin tones were favored compared to those contestants with darker skin tones. Further research would investigate how skin tone may hinder or advantage certain contestants competing in exclusive beauty pageants to Black or Hispanic women.

The “bikini line” is a play on words that distinguishes how 1) beauty pageants are defined (e.g., Miss America Organization and Miss Universe Organization) and 2) how pageants are racialized. While both pageant circuits have similarities in terms of competition categories (e.g., personal interview and evening gown), there are stark differences between both. These differences were observed among contestants’ preparation based on the pageant circuit they compete in. This research discovered the “bikini line” between the way in which participants prepared for their respective pageant competition. The USA contestants deployed strict dieting and exercise regimes to attain an “ideal” body that is deemed most desirable at the Miss Texas USA pageant. Contestants from the America circuit, however, were less likely to engage in such extreme exercise and dieting especially given that this pageant circuit eliminated the swimsuit competition. Thus, there is a divide between body management practices between Miss Texas America and Miss Texas USA state delegates. The “bikini line” also reveals how beauty pageants are racialized. Black participants shared their motives for competing that were driven by the lack of racial representation in Texas beauty pageants and to serve as role models for

other Black girls and women to compete. For white and Hispanic participants, their motives were more individualistic (e.g., improving personal growth). Another example of the “bikini line” that reinforces how pageants are racialized is managing racial embodiment. Black women expressed having to train and undo certain aspects of their identity (e.g., accent and hair texture) to meet dominant white aesthetics. White, however, do not have to consider such training given that they are privileged in this space, overrepresented in Texas pageantry, and already meet such dominant aesthetics. In the era of the Black Lives Matter movement, this study seeks to show that racial barriers in pageantry still exist and how Black women continue to make strides in a space that once barred them from competing (e.g., Miss America Organization) to be a representation for other Black women to compete.

**APPENDIX A:
IRB APPROVAL**



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Institutional Review Board

FWA00000351
IRB00001138, IRB00012110
Office of Research
12201 Research Parkway
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

February 17, 2020

Dear Chelsea Belanger:

On 2/17/2020, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	There She Is, All-American Face and Form: Motives, Experiences, and Perceptions of Race Relations in Mainstream Pageantry
Investigator:	Chelsea Belanger
IRB ID:	STUDY00001345
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chelsea C. Belanger , Category: Faculty Research Approval;• Chelsea C. Belanger , Category: IRB Protocol;• Chelsea C. Belanger , Category: Interview / Focus Questions;• Chelsea C. Belanger , Category: Survey / Questionnaire;• Chelsea C. Belanger , Category: Consent Form;• Chelsea C. Belanger , Category: Recruitment Materials;

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please submit a modification request to the IRB. Guidance on submitting Modifications and Administrative Check-in are detailed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Kamille C. Birkbeck

Kamille Birkbeck
Designated Reviewer

APPENDIX B:
PRE-INTERVIEW SURVEY

PRE-INTERVIEW SURVEY



1. What is your age? _____
2. What is your race/ethnicity? _____
3. Please indicate your highest level of education completed.
☐ High School ☐ Some college ☐ College degree ☐ Graduate degree ☐ Graduate student
4. What is your religious preference, if at all?
☐ Christian/Protestant ☐ Catholic ☐ Jewish ☐ Muslim ☐ Agnostic ☐ Atheist
☐ Other (Please specify.) _____
5. Please indicate the specific denomination or faith tradition, if applicable.

6. How religious do you consider yourself to be?
☐ Very religious ☐ Somewhat religious ☐ Not too religious ☐ Not at all religious
7. What is your height? _____
8. What is your current weight? _____
9. What is your occupation? _____
10. What was your household income level growing up?
☐ Lower-income ☐ Middle-income ☐ Higher-income
11. Have any of your immediate family members ever competed in a pageant, if so, who? _____
12. Age at which you started competing in pageants. _____
13. How many total pageants have you competed in? Teen Division _____ Miss Division _____
14. How many total pageant titles have you won? Teen Division _____ Miss Division _____

APPENDIX C:
INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Interview Guide

Motivation

1. How did you first become interested in pageantry?
 - a. Did something or someone inspire you to compete?
2. What initially motivated you to compete in your first beauty pageant (e.g., scholarship money, building self-confidence, making new friends, opportunities, just to win a crown, etc.)?
3. Can you describe your first pageant experience as a contestant?
 - a. Did this experience encourage you to continue participating in pageantry, why or why not?
4. What did it mean to you to compete in a beauty pageant?
 - a. Was this ever a goal of yours to accomplish growing up?

Experience in Pageantry

5. How, if at all, has competing in pageants been a pleasant experience for you?
 - a. Have you ever had an unpleasant experience while competing in a pageant?
6. From your experience, what was the pageant culture like backstage, during the competition, during rehearsals, orientation, etc.?
 - a. How were you treated by the other contestants, pageant officials, or pageant volunteers?
 - b. Have you ever seen unusual behavior by other contestants (e.g., refusing to eat, talking negatively about other contestants or directors, etc.)?
7. How did you perceive the other contestants you were competing with?
 - a. How would you describe the behaviors of the other contestants?
 - b. Have you ever experienced conflict with the other contestants or pageant officials?
 - c. Has there ever been a time where conflict arose leading up to, during, or after a pageant competition (e.g., unfavorable views of the winner, favoritism by the pageant director, etc.)?
8. Can you describe how you prepared for a beauty pageant?
 - a. Did you introduce any dietary restrictions, exercise routines, pageant coaching, etc. to your everyday routine?
 - b. Have you ever engaged in risky behaviors to achieve your bodily goals?
 - c. Have you had any plastic surgery done for the purposes of a pageant? If so, can you describe that experience?
9. What opportunities have come your way since competing in pageantry (e.g., modeling, scholarships, job opportunities, etc.)?
10. How, if at all, have you utilized the skills gained in pageantry in your everyday life such as in school or in your career (e.g., public speaking skills, confidence, poise, punctuality, etc.)?

Religion

11. Can you describe a time when you utilized prayer or other religious practices during your pageant experience?
 - a. Have you ever prayed with a fellow contestant(s) before or during a pageant? If so, why?
 - b. How, if at all, has religion been displayed leading up to or during a pageant by other contestants or pageant staff?
12. Did your faith ever play a role in the decision-making of your pageant attire (e.g., swimsuit, evening gown, opening number outfit, interview outfit, etc.)?
 - a. Did you choose to wear a one-piece instead of a two-piece swimsuit because of your faith? If so, why?
 - b. Did you select a modest evening gown as oppose to a less modest gown because of your religious beliefs? If so, why?
 - c. Do you believe that contestants have a better chance of winning if they wear more revealing pageant attire during the competition, why or why not?

Race

13. How do you think race and ethnicity impact beauty pageants?
 - a. Does racism or discrimination exist in pageantry? Why or why not.

14. What are the racial dynamics like among pageant contestants?
15. How, if at all, was the pageant or pageants you have competed in racially and culturally diverse?
 - a. From your experience, did minority women win the pageant or pageants you competed in?
16. Based on your experience, does white privilege exist in beauty pageants?
 - a. Does having a certain outward appearance, such as being thin, tall, and straight hair, advantage contestants? Why or why not?
17. There have been a number of unique moments in current mainstream pageants such as a greater representation of minority women winning state and national titles. What are your personal feelings on this shift in representation in pageantry?
 - a. Should race and ethnicity be a factor in selecting a titleholder?

Feminism

18. Do you identify as a feminist? If so, does your pageant experience have anything to do with your identity as a feminist? Why or why not?
 - a. Do you think beauty pageants objectify women?
19. How, if at all, has competing in pageantry been empowering or disempowering for you?

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